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# OUR PRODIGAL SON CULTURE

*A Critical Comment on Modern Culture from  
the Standpoint of the Christian Religion*

*By*

HUGH STEVENSON TIGNER



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*Dedicated in Gratitude*

To the Dean and Faculty of the Canton Theological School, Canton, New York, 1927-1931,  
One of Whom Has Since Become a Happy  
Memory.

*They took in a waif, and fed and warmed him  
to the best of their ability. But in no proper  
sense of the word are they responsible for any  
of the ideas expressed herein.*

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OUR  
PRODIGAL SON  
CULTURE



## CHAPTER ONE

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### Revelation

*Or, What the Reader May Expect*

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THE CHIEF result of those great travails which we glibly call the First World War and the World Depression was the shattering of our faith and our sense of security. Before the unloosing of those cataclysms the citizens of modern Western culture thought they had found the way of salvation. They were not yet perfected in grace, but they felt that, as Herbert Spencer declared, "What we call evil and immorality must disappear. It is certain that man must become perfect." And when Spencer said "must" he was not exhorting, but simply describing the inevitable course of man's destiny. Our fathers, and their fathers and grandfathers before them in an age of expansion and a big bull market, had crawled into their own optimistic slogans, made themselves comfortable and fallen asleep, feeling like the chambered nautilus that every year they were spiraling into a "dome more vast."

The social earthquakes of the last twenty-five years have cracked the walls of this spiritual structure and made living within it an exposure to the bitter winds. The creeds about life and destiny, the doctrines economic, political, social and spiritual which young men chanted before the rising sun a generation or two ago do not call forth the familiar response of "Amen" today, but rather an "O yeah?" or a Bronx cheer. True, many of those thirty-nine articles are still recited, but their reci-

tation has a forced and squawky sound; they no longer represent the gospel, but something that we ought to believe and don't.

The social forces, the ideas and institutions which our immediate predecessors trusted, we do not. Capitalism, nationalism, liberalism, science, laissez faire, popular education, humanitarianism, the white man's burden — we no longer feel that we can depend upon these as instruments of redemption. The nineteenth century myth of Progress, which made secularism evangelical, justified the ways of man to himself, touched with splendor every meager life and wove the various noises of the world into a celestial-sounding symphony, has come to be looked upon in these latter years as just a myth; and when our myths reach that stage they no longer hold any reality or spiritual nourishment. The whole house of life established by modernity has fallen into a state where men cannot live and have their being in it with the surety, dignity and meaning essential to their natures.

## II

The First World War had not been over for a decade when it was recognized by the more sensitive and thoughtful minds (in Europe at least) that the modern epoch — so vigorous, so proud and full of promise — had suffered a mortal wound. And when in the 1930's the great depression settled down upon us, and the nations found themselves unwilling and unable to do anything except to repeat those things which had led to previous catastrophe, it became plain to everyone that the modern comedy was over, leaving behind a scene of broken hopes and augmented fears.

In 1931 or thereabouts, Mr. John M. Keynes, the British economist, paid a visit to this country, and a re-

porter met him at the wharf, asking: "Mr. Keynes, do you know of any parallel in history to this depression?" "Yes," said Keynes; "we call it the Dark Ages, and it lasted for about five hundred years." Possibly Mr. Keynes was trying to be as witty as we thought he was at the time; but subsequent developments proved his remark to have been prophetic — at least so far as the darkness is concerned. Our plight has taken a positive form in the resurgence of barbarism. The loss of security has brought about a dissolution of the bonds of community which hold civilized men together with some degree of cooperation, confidence in one another, and common agreement as to what is right and true and good. Mankind has been cut up, and is being cut up still further, into power-seeking factions — national, racial, political, ideological; factions which fear one another, hate one another, have no compunctions about murdering one another or about breaking their pledged word. Each builds and lives within its own defensive myth, according to which "our" group is pictured as gloriously noble, infinitely superior and unjustly persecuted, and the "others" group is pictured as abysmally wicked, despicable and entitled to no quarter. The result is a combination of one hundred per cent parochialism, absolute self-righteousness and fanatical fury, which is barbarism. One's own faction is seen as so absolutely right and good that its will must prevail over all others; those who do not share "our" values, purposes, beliefs, habits and desires are seen as so absolutely evil that they deserve nothing but annihilation. Each group feels itself to be in such a desperate position that it can recognize no claim above its own. Life loses its moral vision, its spiritual aspiration, its creative endeavor, its charity and humility, and becomes a brutal struggle to defend

"our" group by destroying the other. There is nothing essentially sacred about human beings, no horror of spilling blood, no taboo against telling a lie or breaking a promise. There is no pity. The arch question becomes, Who shall destroy whom?

### III

The pages that follow are concerned with this predicament, and are pointed toward a solution or the beginning of a solution. They expound a thesis, which, in a sentence, is: that the Hebrew-Christian \* religion contains truths which are not only still valid but also indispensable for the preservation and advance of civilization; that modern culture made a fatal mistake in trying to cast these truths aside as the outworn garments of an immature age; and that our saving help lies in a rediscovery of this religion, a re-establishment of its spiritual authority, and a fresh conversion to its outlooks, insights and values.

I am aware that this thesis will at once strike many people as absurd. They will remind me that Christianity has been losing ground steadily for three hundred years, and assert that I am betting on a very sick horse. I admit the fact, and will consider it as my first problem.

\* These two are linked together because of their integral relationship. Christianity was the end-product of a process of evolution within Judaism. Jesus, regardless of whatever else one may wish to say about him, was a Jew nurtured by Jewish culture; and what he did was to bring out and make predominant certain implications within Judaism which had been undergoing development and amplification in the prophets — Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah. What Jesus meant by "love" and what Isaiah meant by "righteousness" were approximately the same thing.

In a sense, Jesus was a destroyer of Judaism, and the scribes and Pharisees catalogued him as such. But we should not overlook the fact that he destroyed it by fulfilling its prophetic tendencies.



But I do not concede the argument. Recent history has shown all our horses to be sick. Many others will protest more vigorously. I am, they will say, betting on a dead horse, one that died when science entered the race; I am advocating reactionism when progressivism is called for, I am being obscurant when the need is for clear thinking. I shall be told that Christianity no longer has anything unique or indispensable to contribute to the present and future life of mankind, that the most promising ideas and activities of the day come from secular sources; and I shall be asked to name some significant thing which Christians are thinking and doing that is not being duplicated by other enlightened and conscientious citizens. This last will frankly embarrass me, for I have to admit that the contribution which Christianity has to make is not being noticeably made at the present time. Nevertheless, it has one. And I have become convinced, through a gradual process of experience and reflection rather than through any "sudden rending of the veil of clay," that if modern civilization is to avoid the nadir of collapse and discover a way out, it must find its solution within the framework of the Christian philosophy and upon the basis of Christian truth.

I hope that some who do not agree with me, who consider themselves more or less fortunately emancipated from what is known as religion, will be curious and open-minded enough to read further. Indeed, you are the reader I should most prize. I confess to having catered to you, your prejudices and doubts, all along in the writing of this book. But I hope also that many who agree with my thesis will feel inclined to read what I have to say, and will be stimulated and fortified by it. To these latter I wish to say at the moment that, while Christianity is the truest and most important truth in

the world, Christians have hardly begun to explore and appreciate its meaning for their present world; and that the Christian body is in no sense of the word spiritually prepared — or, as the current expression has it, ideologically prepared — to take the position of leadership which it ought to be occupying. This book will not prepare it, but I trust that it may be a small help. It will be this if only it throws some light on the character of our problem.

What I am about to say is of the nature of squint-eyed groping rather than wide-eyed prophecy. My book is a prolegomenon rather than a monograph, and is offered in a humility which, I fear, will be well concealed by the presumptuousness of my undertaking.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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### Christian Decrepitude

#### *Or, Betting on a Sick Horse*

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THE MOST immediate fact to be noted about Christianity \* is of course the state of desuetude into which it has been suffered to lapse. It is an abandoned house, revisited now and then for old remembrance' sake. Modern men no longer live and die, rear their children and make their home within it. In some places they have been drastically logical about it and have sought to tear down the old house. But mostly the Western world has been sentimental and has allowed it to stand as a sort of souvenir of grandfather's day.

The ideas expressed in services of Christian worship are not sufficiently alive to be called ideas: they are spiritual fossils, the remains of ideas, relics of a former culture. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein. It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture." Such statements — though we may recognize them as beautiful, though they may exude an atmosphere that is pleasing to us, though they may evoke a fleeting emotion — such statements do not represent the world of ideas and realities in which we carry on the normal functions of our life. We have moved out of that house.

\* Since this book happens to be written from the standpoint of American Protestantism, it should be understood that I have that section of Christendom primarily (though not exclusively) in mind when the term "Christianity" is used.



Excepting a sprinkling of scattered individuals, nobody finds in Christianity today a knowledge or a faith that is "clear enough to be a beacon" for our social navigation, or "sharp enough to cut a way for us through the tangled confusion of the present," or vital enough to provide "a program of action through which we can claim the future as our own." Anyone acting like the men and officers of the Roman army who laid down their swords and helmets and refused further service, giving as their only reason, "I am a Christian," would be looked upon at best as antediluvian or plain crazy.

Christianity no longer means anything in its own right. As John Macmurray puts it, we cannot expect a Christian to take any course of action in relation to the critical issues of contemporary society that is in any essential way different from the action which would be taken by a liberal-minded gentleman who makes no profession of Christianity. Such terms as "Christian morality" or "the Christian attitude," whenever they are used, refer to the commonly accepted decencies of middle class society.<sup>1</sup> As the inquisitive Lynds were told in Middletown, being a Christian is "just being civilized."

How do ninety-nine per cent of our population make up their minds about the questions of the time? Do we think and act as *Christians*? Do we read and reflect upon Christian literature for insight and guidance in determining our attitudes and policies? Plainly, we do not. The word "Christian" is occasionally bandied about as a shibboleth; but we think and act as business men, or as citizens of a national state, or as members of a particular profession, of the Republican party, of a trade union, or of the American Legion. And we make up our minds according as the leaders and propaganda of

such groups may edify us, or as our favorite radio commentator sways us, or as our newspaper pictures the case. Not only is the Bible a reverently unread volume, but if there exists any body of literature presenting the Christian viewpoint in terms relevant to the present, very few of us know of it, or would be interested if we did know of it.

How meaningful is Christian fellowship? Considerably less meaningful than some other forms of fellowship. For instance, the average church member is hardly aware that he belongs to a Christian world community, and does not feel that he has more in common with Christians in Germany, Czechoslovakia, China and Japan than with fellow Americans who do not share the Christian philosophy of life. The bonds of Rotary, of Freemasonry, of the National Association of Manufacturers, of the Public Works Administration, are doubtless as strong as the bonds of Christianity; and the bonds of nationalism are infinitely stronger — a bond of unity which, ironically, is one of the primary causes of the world's terrible disunity.

How do its own members feel toward the Christian church? For the most part, their loyalty to it is a left-over loyalty. They look upon the church as another social organization making its bid for support along with a half-dozen other equally important organizations. In fact, some other organization is usually rated as being a little more important.

In so far as Christianity persists at all, it persists as a formless body of vague sentiment which is drawn upon, when the occasion arises, to bless and bolster the values, interests, attitudes and authorities of the secular world. It is no longer respected as sovereignly true, but as slavishly useful. The conservative officers of the German

army tried to tell Hitler that the paganizing effort of the more vehement nazis was a serious mistake, and that Christianity should receive official support. But their argument was one of expedience: Christianity, with its belief in immortality, would help make braver fighters out of the German soldiery. Not many years ago in this country the canvassers for a great cathedral's building fund were instructed by the high priest as follows: "Go to the men who command great wealth. Tell them that the cathedral and the religion which it symbolizes are the guarantee of the social order on which their prosperity depends. Tell them that religion is the insurance of their prosperity, and ask them whether they think they are paying enough for this insurance." As a church billboard in uptown New York expressed it during the roaring twenties: COME TO CHURCH. CHRISTIAN WORSHIP INCREASES YOUR EFFICIENCY. Your efficiency in what? Why, your efficiency in whatever you are doing, of course. Thus, from being a statement of truth about the nature of the universe, Christianity has descended to the low level of serving and glorifying the prevailing interests and values.

## II

Indeed, modern Christianity has become so thoroughly unable to stand upon its own feet, and so definitely a reflector of secular lights, that it apparently cannot make a ringing pronouncement upon its own grounds or within its own terms. For example, here are some extracts from a devotional booklet distributed by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America for the Lenten season in 1936:

The genuinely scientific spirit is the spirit of the open mind. . . . It is the spirit of profound reverence and of unlimited patience, willing to wait in the presence of facts until truth is revealed. . . . The scientific spirit is the spirit of complete devotion to human welfare, is willing to pay any price that truth may prevail. In all these respects it is very close to the spirit of Christ. This spirit is the hope of the world.

Thus Christ, dragged in by a side door, is seen justified because he was "scientific" — just as Mr. Bruce Barton found him to be a worthy fellow because he was a great advertiser, a favorite after-dinner speaker and the founder of modern business.

There is much in our civilization [I am quoting from the booklet again] which is unscientific and which therefore must go. It is unscientific for men whose welfare makes them dependent upon each other to engage in industrial strife. A social order in which a few are unreasonably rich and many are condemned to starved and thwarted lives is unscientific. It is unscientific for nations that are dependent upon each other to engage in international war. . . . Greed, malice and superstition are utterly unscientific. So is falsehood.<sup>2</sup>

Note the argument and its underlying assumptions: what makes these evils fundamentally bad, and the reason why they must be resisted and eradicated, is that they are "unscientific." Science is the authority — neither Christ nor the will of God. As a matter of fact, these evils are not unscientific, for science is not concerned with evil or with good. Nor is the "scientific spirit" the "spirit of complete devotion to human welfare." Science is not an authority on moral matters. By what mental processes the author arrived at such conclusions



*Values  
desires  
are  
science*

I do not know; but he was apparently struggling with the dilemma faced by all who seek to identify themselves with Christianity in a non-Christian culture. Desiring to advocate certain moral values and attitudes, he sensed that Christianity is in too decrepit a state to provide an effective background for preaching them; therefore he chose a secular background. Christ was alluded to, for the Lenten season is his occasion; but science supplied the authority. It is an authority which most people accept and respect.

This case was duplicated in the literature sent out by the National Conference of Christians and Jews in the early part of 1938 to promote the observance of Brotherhood Day. One might surmise that here at least the classic world view of Christianity could furnish the arguments and the ideological framework:

God, who created the world and all that is in it, gives all men life and breath and everything. From a common origin he has created every nation of mankind. . . . There is one God and Father of us all, who is above all, through all, and in you all. . . . God is love, and he who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him.

Theoretically, what a background that ought to provide, what compelling symbols that ought to supply, for an appeal to celebrate a day of brotherhood! However, the National Conference did not deem those old notions sufficiently alive to use them — and the conference was undoubtedly more right than wrong.

They did begin with a statement to the effect that we all believe “in God and a religious interpretation of life’s meanings,” and about each denominational group’s being “equally opposed to atheism and materialism”; but their appeal for tolerance and unity was framed in

terms of nationalism and sportsmanship. Brotherhood Day, they said,

proclaims the principle that individuals of all religious groups, *as American citizens*, can and should cooperate. . . . As American citizens, those of all faiths . . . acknowledge the *same patriotic obligations*. . . . "Make America Safe for Differences," the slogan of Brotherhood Day, expresses the substance of the American ideal of religious democracy. [Italics mine.]

I must confess that I do not see how the National Conference, under the circumstances, could very well have spoken differently. But their language is a tacit admission that the citizens of modern culture do not think and feel and act within the scaffolding of a Christian "interpretation of life's meanings."

A story which Dr. Bernard I. Bell tells on himself summarizes the whole situation. Once he was engaged to teach religion in Columbia University, the idea being that he was to help the freshmen and sophomores in the problem of correlating their religion with the new knowledge they were meeting in the natural sciences and social studies. After a year or two, says Dr. Bell, it became plain to him that his mission was ridiculous. He was trying to deal with a problem that didn't exist, because his students had no religion to correlate.<sup>3</sup>

No  
religion  
to  
correlate

### III

Even so, I have stated the case feebly and incompletely. In order fully to appreciate the neglected and innocuous condition in which Christianity presently stands it is necessary to make some comparisons with an age when this was not the situation. That means turning back and observing some of the salient features of

western European culture between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. This happens to be the only time in the history of mankind when Christian ideology enclosed the whole life of an entire society — although our hindsight tells us that the citizens of that age were a little reckless in dubbing the whole population “the Christian body” (*corpus Christianum*).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See John Macmurray, *Creative Society* (Eddy & Page, 1935), chap. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond C. Brooks, D.D., *The Fellowship of Prayer* (Commission on Evangelism and Devotional Life of the General Council of Congregational and Christian Churches, 1935), pp. 20–21.

✓ <sup>3</sup> Bernard I. Bell, “More Dogma, Please,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Oct. 1938.



### CHAPTER THREE

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## What Christianity Once Achieved . . .

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THE MIDDLE AGES have been dealt with polemically ever since they were classified as the Middle Ages, and it seems that writers are warmer about the subject today than they were at the beginning of the controversy. On the one hand, "medievalism" has long been used as a smear word, connoting, as one fervent believer<sup>1</sup> in modernity has phrased it, "the pinched and starved humanity which ecclesiastical otherworldliness and the superstition of asceticism had long held up as the highest standard of spiritual attainment." Just as Mussolini has employed the bogey of "communism" to justify the forthright acts of his desperate regime, saying to his not altogether happy subjects, "Behold the horror that I saved you from!" so have moderns characteristically found comfort in picturing the Middle Ages as a period when mankind huddled miserably under a big black umbrella of repression, ignorance and fear — "Our world may have its faults but think of the horrendous thralldom from which we have emerged!" On the other hand, a small but growing and very articulate band have arisen in these post-modern years who yearn for a return to medievalism, and look upon such a return as the answer to all our remediable woes. What makes their preaching so impressive, and so fruitful in bringing forth counter-preaching, is the fact that most of the members of this group are converts, having been born



in the Protestant fold and reared on the milk and honey of the Renaissance.

So I must hasten to explain that I intend to sail through this Scylla and Charybdis, that my motives are pure in the matter, and that I regard the medieval epoch neither as something to be advocated nor as something to be condemned. It seems to me equally obvious that fifteen or twenty generations of men succeeded in finding life and support for life within medieval culture, and that medievalism is inapplicable to modern circumstances. The Middle Ages were, in one important sense, a Christian epoch, and I believe in Christianity. But the form of medieval Christianity was found in an experience and a set of circumstances which are not ours today, so I do not "believe" in medieval Christianity. I think the instruction which the Middle Ages have for us is as much warning as example. My only reason for mentioning that vanished culture is to throw our own into sharper outline through contrasting it with another. Let us proceed.

## II

Any observer not standing on tiptoe for an argument is bound to recognize that the culture of western Europe during the Middle Ages embodied one of the cardinal requisites of a Christian culture, namely, an integrity of being. No phase of living dwelt apart from the whole, or went its own way, or set up its own rules and values; no function or institution enjoyed splendid isolation or exercised independent sovereignty. There was no such thing as business for the pure sake of making money, as politics for the sole purpose of giving one group of hungry office-seekers a turn at the public trough or of giving a special economic interest the

power to enact favorable legislation: these spheres of action were not water-tight compartments, but were subordinated to principles drawn from ethics and theology. There was no such thing as art for art's sake: art portrayed the truth of the Christian drama. There was no such thing as education for the sake of becoming "cultured" or for the sake of acquiring readier tools for opening oysters: education instructed men in the way of salvation. There was no such thing as science running off on a tangent of sheer curiosity or of pursuing its own irresponsible course: the end of all science was to serve its queen, Theology. Knowledge which did not aid man to know God and save his soul, any intellectual pursuit not loyal to this supreme end, ministered to the obstinacy and vainglory of man. There was no such thing as living for the pursuit of success: what would it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Medieval culture was theoretically organized like a logical, close-knit sermon from a text of St. Paul: "I demolish theories and any rampart thrown up to resist the knowledge of God, I take every project prisoner to make it obey Christ."<sup>2</sup> Man's living was seen surrounded by the universal and eternal. The earth was the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. One dominant purpose ran through the whole of creation, the achievement of salvation; and to that end all the affairs of life were related. What Christianity achieved in the Middle Ages was Christendom.

Perhaps from the modern standpoint the most vivid illustration of the practical application of this theory was in the field of economics. Medieval Christendom cherished in its thought and embodied in its regulations the words of St. Paul about the love of money being the root of all evil. Nobody discussed questions of business

H.  
Perkins  
Wm. H. Hall  
R. C. Allen

practice and economic organization purely or primarily in terms of expedience, or of pecuniary profit and loss, or of efficiency. That was not done until the beginning of the seventeenth century, and then it was done, says R. H. Tawney, "with an air of not quite reputable cynicism."<sup>3</sup>

*Shareholder's not  
loyal to  
communism*

The activities of commerce were a sordid and morally perilous business, though not too sordid to be recognized as a necessary part of the world or to remain ungoverned by the great end which was common to all. Hence wealth and the handling of it were strictly subjected to concepts of social and spiritual function. Property was not something invested merely with the owner's rights, but also with social duties. Private ownership was permitted as a concession to human frailty; communism was recognized as the ideal. As far as was practicable under private ownership, property must serve common purposes. It must be in the largest possible number of hands (an idea which has been currently revived). It must provide support for the poor. Its owners must be ready to share with those in need, and "need" did not necessarily mean destitution. From our point of view, the owner of property was more its trustee.

It was right for a man to seek only so much wealth as was necessary for living in his station. Pecuniary gain as an end in itself was a vicious idolatry. Not only must a man be sure that his trade rendered a public benefit (and those weren't the days when any and all trade was looked upon as a public blessing), but he could take no more gain from it than the wages of his labor. "He who has enough to satisfy his wants [wants were not then considered insatiable], and nevertheless ceaselessly labors to acquire riches, either in order to obtain a higher social position, or that subsequently he may live without

labor, or that his sons may become men of wealth and importance — all such are incited by a damnable avarice, sensuality or pride.” So wrote a Schoolman of the fourteenth century.

This way of looking at things economic did not represent the ideas of a group of subversive New Dealers; it was the Grand Old Party speaking, the voice of recognized and practically undisputed authority. For example, the Spanish dealers on the Antwerp exchange had a confessor instead of a lobbyist or a publicity agent, and they sent him to Paris to consult the theologians of the university about the moral status of speculation. In the early sixteenth century, when the traditional system of regulations was beginning to buckle, the great German banking house of Fugger financed the journey of Eck to Italy for the purpose of finding out whether the University of Bologna would confirm his bold argument that the canon law allowed interest to be charged on transactions between merchants.

The medieval world, for all its variety and its localisms, was an integrated structure. There were divisions of labor, and higher and lower orders within society; but all had an appointed and rational place in the hierarchical Christian pyramid, with God at the apex, and, a little too closely beneath him, the church. There were degrees of difference in quality among different orders of being, but the difference was relative, not absolute. As St. Thomas stated it, the world of nature presented an ascending scale of being. The lowest order was represented by physical objects; then came living creatures; then man; after man the church, and finally God. These were all bound together as an organic whole under the concepts of “matter” and “form.” Each order of being was “matter” for the one above it, and “form”

*Business*



for the order below it. Thus man is "matter" for the church, and "form" for the lower creatures. The ascent stops with God, who was conceived as pure form or the Form of forms.

The stock modern accusation that medieval thought split reality into two distinct levels of being, the natural and the supernatural, is either a clumsy misunderstanding or an attempt to be disparaging. The truth is quite the opposite. In medieval thought the supernatural was always seen as having a dynamic relationship with, and an intrusion into, the natural. The supramundane was conceived as the completion of the natural, containing in full power and perfect essence the facts and forces imperfectly resident in the mundane. Indeed, the splitting of reality into two disparate worlds was achieved only by certain schools of modern thought, notably that one which has placed moral man against a physical order of "blind and omnipotent matter rolling on its relentless way."

The medieval world was one that could be symbolized in a Gothic church, synthesized in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, summarized and tied into one intellectual knot by Thomas Aquinas.

### III

To be sure, there were discords in the medieval harmony — conflicts and contradictions never completely reconciled; silent departures from the accepted standard and open revolts against it; pledges broken, principles unapplied, doctrines conveniently suspended or cleverly evaded, cloak-room deals, and no little argument about it and about. The church never applied its moral doctrines to the fact of serfdom, for instance. Only the revolting peasants themselves were so uncir-

cumspect, or an occasional "mad" priest like John Ball, who said: "Ah, ye good people, the matters goeth not well to pass in England, nor shall not do till everything be common, and that there be no villeins nor gentlemen." In accordance with the prevailing precepts, Dante placed the Cahorsine moneylenders in hell; but Pope Innocent IV (in 1248) honored them with the title of "peculiar sons of the Roman Church." When the pious city fathers of Florence discovered that their religion would not allow them to carry on the desired banking transactions, they resorted to the hypocrisy of importing Jews to do the business for them. There is no doubt that the church became generally and notoriously corrupt, as the Middle Ages drew to a close, through attempting or pretending to apply the specific codes of a former time to changed and changing conditions.

There were treasons of the spirit and of the flesh. Among cultivated men there was absorption in the classics for their own sake, and pursuit of profane knowledge in a manner that raised questions about the methods of faith. Some tended to set reason above revelation, even to elevate their own individual wisdom. And love, "not of the Crucified," contributed its perennial belligerence. "To the church's disparagement of the flesh, love made answer openly, not slinking behind hedges or closed doors, nor even sheltering itself within wedlock's lawfulness."<sup>4</sup> Which is another way of saying that the citizens of medieval Christendom were men.

Despite these many breaches of the theory, despite many disruptive tendencies which were later to have their day, the theory was able to vanquish its adversaries, and the goal of salvation and the concept of the will of God "remained the triumphant standard of dis-

crimination by which the elements of medieval life were esteemed or rejected " <sup>5</sup> for a period of almost five hundred years.

All this is apt to strike us moderns as sheer perversity and superstition, so alien is it to anything that we know. But what this culture supplied to the men living within it was an organizing principle, a point of reference; a comprehensive view of the whole in which the fragments were not fragmentary but enmeshed in a social, moral and spiritual function; a coherent system of thought, faith and institutions in which, and by means of which, the individual and the generations found a rational and meaningful relationship to creation, found a way of bringing their lives " to a discriminating unity and certain peace." <sup>6</sup> Christianity provided that point of reference and that comprehensive view.

To the modern rationalist it has looked like treason to the human spirit, if not downright masochism, to regard the earth as belonging to God rather than man; and no modernist seems able to appreciate sympathetically what Professor G. G. Coulton calls that "fatal exaggeration which enthroned Theology not merely as mother, but as Queen, of all the sciences." I am not an apologist for medievalism, but it is highly probable that this conception and arrangement of things was more on the side of life than certain opposite conceptions and arrangements with which we are presently familiar. To date the earth has never actually been viewed as belonging to man, but only to a particular group of men, and I cannot honestly say that this view and the attempt to assert it in practice have been a great boon to human values. Nor does it appear that the jealously guarded freedom and independence of modern science, or the godlike "objectivity" of the scientist, have rendered a

Life must be organized

WHAT CHRISTIANITY ONCE ACHIEVED . . . 23

howling big service to the life-purpose. It seems to me that nothing could be more treasonous to life than the irresponsible attitude and position assumed by the modern scientist, who has said, in effect: "We give you knowledge and power; use it to produce good things for the human race and so to glorify God, or use it to poison the human heart and to blow the bodies of little children into something that resembles a jumble of old rags and cat meat. We can't afford to care; we are scientists." All we insist upon is that we be permitted to remain scientists, to serve Science without interference." The modern mentality, obsessed with the idea of freedom and commendably distrustful of tyranny, has failed to understand adequately the elemental truth that freedom requires organization, and has not grasped the practical point that one authority or another is going to use science (and all the arts and utilities) for its ends. The church can be a tyrant, but so can the state; and theology may be an imperfect queen, but Mars is an unqualifiedly bad sovereign. The medieval system contained, I believe, a "fatal" mistake, but I don't think the above was it; and I am sure that medieval culture was not as monstrous a perversion as is commonly pictured.

Henry Osborn Taylor has suggested that medieval culture did for a whole society what every mature individual must do for himself:

Whoever reflects upon his life and its compass of thought, of inclination, of passion, action and capacity for happiness or desolation, is likely to consider how best he may harmonize its elements. He will have to choose and reject; and within him may arise a conflict which he must bring to reconciliation if he will have peace. He will need to sacrifice certain of his impulses or even his rational desires. As with a thoughtful individual, so with thoughtful people of an

Science



epoch, among whom like standards of discrimination may be found prevailing. The ninth century received, with patristic Christianity, a standard of selection and rejection. In conformity with it men, century after century, were to make their choices.<sup>7</sup>

That standard was "salvation." Oneness and peace and well-being consisted in singleness of purpose in the endeavor to know God and submit to his will.

#### IV

In case I have not been cautious enough to avoid stirring up the partisan passions which beat about this subject, let me say that the foregoing words should not be mistaken for an evaluation of the Middle Ages. All I have attempted to do is describe one important aspect of that culture. Judging the Middle Ages is an entirely different matter, a matter in which I am not presently interested, and a task which I am not competent to perform. To pronounce judgment upon this period one would have to weigh a baffling complexity of pros and cons, untangle many contradictions and paradoxes; and then one would be estimating a volume of water that long ago ran past the mill. Perhaps the only honest outcome of this effort would be some such trivial summary as, "The medieval epoch presented a strange mixture of good and evil, of barbarism and civilization, of Christianity and paganism."

There was a vast amount of cruelty, superstition and abomination in that epoch, a good deal of it organized and justified in the name of Christ, and passing for sound Christian doctrine. The Middle Ages, it must be remembered, followed the Dark Ages, and there persisted in the later period not only the perennial foibles of humankind but also a pagan and barbarian heritage.

When Christianity became official in western Europe, and the church presumed to be not a society but society itself, many an old sepulcher full of dead men's bones and all manner of uncleanness was unsuccessfully consecrated by a thin coat of whitewash. "The result was a compromise — a compromise of which the critic can say, 'How much that was intolerable was accepted!' and the eulogist, 'How much that was intolerable was softened!' Both critic and eulogist are right." <sup>8</sup>

It remains true, however, that if Christianity only qualified the Middle Ages it qualified them in a very significant way. The Christian gospel was spoken and heard — not by all but by some; Christianity was present to qualify that which was not Christian; and despite all the breaches, evasions and misinterpretations of Christian truth, men knew themselves to be living in God's world (however perverted his official agents often were), and life had an infinite and awful meaning (however terrible and sordid some of its experiences may have been). This last is not only a matter of supreme importance; it cannot but appear to people of the present age as a most enviable and even singular phenomenon.

One need not be either a Christian or a scholar to appreciate the fact that life in the Middle Ages had a meaning. One has only to visit a museum and behold for a few imaginative moments a reproduced portion of some Gothic church of the twelfth or thirteenth century. Here one sees a structure of stone and glass, of arches and statuary, that took the most skilled craftsmen and talented artists, the surplus resources and organized effort of a whole community, and generations of time to construct. Why did those men and that community bother to build it? Why were they so lavish and slavish with time, energy, talent and wealth, making a structure that

*organized  
life*

dwarfed everything else, making it so unnecessarily rich and wonderful, a building which had but an infinitesimal economic or political value, if it had any at all? Because there was a great spiritual truth about life and the universe to be recognized, and this building expressed in art the beauty and the holiness of that truth.

Such is the story of what Christianity once achieved, imperfectly but nevertheless impressively. . . .

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William Henry Hudson, *The Story of the Renaissance* (Henry Holt & Co., 1924).

<sup>2</sup> II Cor. 10:6 (Moffatt).

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926).

<sup>4</sup> H. O. Taylor, *The Medieval Mind* (3rd American ed.; The Macmillan Co., 1919), II, 562-63.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 557.

<sup>8</sup> Tawney, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

*Cathedrals Built by  
Convicts.  
Churches Built by Bonds.*



## CHAPTER FOUR

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### . . . And Then Lost

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THE TYPE of world I have been trying to suggest was not simply different from the one in which we presently live; it was almost exactly antithetical to ours. Most of the things that men called "sweet" in 1900 were known as "bitter" six hundred years before. In the earlier world Christianity supplied the point of reference; in the latter it became something alluded to once in a while, incidentally, and on some occasions. If history were a series of disconnected pools instead of a continuous stream, Christianity would utterly have perished when the modern epoch took shape. It did perish as a culture, becoming a sect. From the sixteenth century on it has led an increasingly shadowy existence. "Christendom" has long been a figure of speech.

*pleasant  
body  
share  
about of  
spirit*

To borrow a metaphor from Goethe's comment on Hamlet, nature dropped an acorn into the vase of the medieval system, and the young oak growing within shattered the vessel. Precisely when this happened it is impossible to say; but in order that our picture may not go dateless I shall assume that the acorn was sprouting lustily by the end of the fourteenth century (in the Renaissance), and that it began cracking its vase in the early 1500's. What happened was that man's life in the Western world took on a predominantly secular character.

"Secularism" probably means to most folks everyday

affairs, or Sunday movies, or the absence of theological jargon; but its meaning is more positive and definite and fundamental than that. It is a matter of both social organization and spiritual outlook. Professor John C. Bennett defines it as "that characteristic of our world according to which life is organized apart from God, as though God did not exist."<sup>1</sup> Secularism finds its absolute (the point of reference according to which life is organized) wholly within history. Thus it has a temporal and mundane deity. More than that, it does not necessarily discover one absolute for the whole of life, but may have several absolutes, each of which is lord of a special domain. Thus secularism is idolatrous and either polytheistic or henotheistic.\*

The simplest illustration is afforded by the modern nation-state. The state is one of our absolutes (in the totalitarian countries it is the only absolute). It is sovereign. No loyalty, value, interest, authority or reality is recognized as transcending it. As Dr. Alfred Rosenberg has said, "The race-bound national soul is the measure of all our thoughts and aspirations, the final criterion of values"; and as the United States Supreme Court declared in the *Macintosh* case, American citizens are expected to regard any declaration of war by Congress as "not inconsistent with the will of God." The

\* Polytheism recognizes the existence of several gods within the same region or territory. For example, in the United States the state is a god, but does not exclude other gods except in times of national emergency, such as war; in times of "normalcy" other gods have an equal authority, e.g., success, which the individual may worship without undue restraint.

Henotheism recognizes the existence of several gods, but only one deity is recognized as reigning within a given territory. For example, in Germany there is but one god, the German Reich. But across the border in Italy the Italian state is recognized as a god. Fascist societies are henotheistic; "democratic" states are polytheistic.



state is the largest area in which the fact of human mutuality is fully recognized, or where cooperation can take place freely. It is an ultimate; it is a god.

The state is a temporal and earth-bound deity, an absolute contained completely within history. It is, moreover, a limited, fragmentary and relative absolute — a particular claiming to be a universal, a piece pretending to be the whole, a relative feigning absoluteness. It is limited to a geographical area, or to a national or racial division of mankind. It includes but a fraction of reality: not only are there many millions of people living beyond its jurisdiction whose existence is important for those living within, but also the state is subject to facts and conditions and forces beyond and above itself. Again, the state is bound to a fraction of time: not even a Fourth of July orator can deny that nations are like Tennyson's "little systems" which "have their day and cease to be." The state claims to be God, but is actually a god.

This is an example of the essential meaning of secularism.

## II

The secularization of society, I say, was the victory of the modern revolution. The various phases of man's activities won sovereign independence and splendid isolation; the social tissue was broken up into a congeries of water-tight compartments and ivory-tower specializations, each with its own peculiar rules and values; the particular was freed from its context in the universal, the member separated from its organism; the concreteness of the concrete and the individuality of the individual were magnified into archtruths; all those comprehensive ideas whereby the imagination grasps the wholeness of

existence were corroded; the order of things was broken down into its constituent parts, creation became a series of juxtaposed departments; living came to be organized upon a horizontal level around a number of sometimes unrelated and sometimes conflicting poles.

1. Consider, for instance, the modern doctrine of art for art's sake, according to which artistic activity is assumed to have self-contained values, and laws and purposes of its own apart from all other purposes and values. Mr. Somerset Maugham has recently stated it thus: Artistic creation is a "specific activity" satisfied by its own exercise, and produced solely for the liberation of the artist's own soul from whatever oppressive sense of truth, terror, tragedy, pity or isolation he may be burdened with. If what the artist depicts has anything more than a private meaning, well and good; for in that case somebody may be prompted to buy it. But "to the artist the communication he offers is a by-product." <sup>2</sup>

The degree of cultural dissolution this notion represents may be quickly glimpsed by contrasting it with medieval art, which was emphatically not an isolated activity satisfied by its own narrow canons. The art of Christendom, like all its other activities, performed a social function: it portrayed a "universal truth," namely, the Christian conception of the nature of the universe and of man's destiny in it. With regard to painting, the Second Council of Nicea laid down the following rules: "The substance of religious scenes is not left to the initiative of the artists: it derives from the principles laid down by the Catholic Church and religious tradition. . . . His art belongs to the painter, its organization and arrangement belongs to the clergy." And, the council might have added, its purpose is to promote the knowledge of God and his will. If this sounds to us like

putting art in a straitjacket, it is well to call to mind the other side: the artist was given a theme which was not his own exclusive private experience, a truth to portray which was not an idiosyncrasy; and when people examined his works they recognized what he was trying to say, and knew that it was very important. Of how many works of art today can as much be said? How many could be destroyed without mankind's losing anything important?

The full logic and significance of the modern theory of art is revealed in Miss Rose Macaulay's description of John Stowe painting in Tamarind Cove, which I transcribe from her book, *I Would Be Private*.<sup>3</sup> It was a clear sunlit day, and off Tamarind Cove the fish boats were setting their fish pots. John Stowe, sitting before his canvas in the shadow of the wood's edge, idly observed the scene about him. But he was not painting any of its objects; he was letting them soak into his soul, there to mix themselves together and later emerge in the shape of John Stowe's special version of reality. He looked at the scene simply to charge his mind with the hot bright strangeness of the region, so that, when he closed his eyes and looked into himself, he should find there whatever inner images that external vision might evoke. These images he would try to paint. They would depict, or suggest, the essence of the truth. To be sure, it would be only John Stowe's truth. But, as he would argue, isn't that all the truth there is — just *my* truth and *your* truth? . . . Having closed his eyes against the brilliant morning, opened them, narrowed them against the glare, John began to draw rapidly what he had seen in that dark brief flash of the soul. He sketched in a number of round, long and triangular shapes lying in a row on a beach; some of the objects looked like skulls, some like



cast-off limbs from the human body, and others like bottles. Wild pawpaws and cactus sprouted out of some of the skulls. But John suspected himself of doing too much conscious arranging, so he erased the vegetation sprouting from one of the skulls, and put on it a woman's hat with a bird of paradise in it. This pleased him much better, and it struck him that the picture would be called "Woman and Putrefying Owl."

2. In economics the modern revolution gave us a "let-alone" philosophy, according to which business achieved the status of a "specific activity" satisfied by the returns in the counting house, and the production and distribution of commodities became a by-product. Just as there came to be art for art's sake, so did there come to be business for business' sake; and as the one was freed from portraying any universal truth or accepted theory of destiny, so did the other escape the thralldom of a social policy.

Does one go into the shoe business to shoe the bare feet of mankind? Don't be sentimental. Do railroads and electric power plants mean transportation and electrical energy for the people? Only incidentally. You are "getting into politics" or becoming a detestable "socialist" when you start thinking of these things in terms of social or economic function. Their primary function is a pecuniary one: to make a profit for their owners (or controllers). If one can make more profit by cutting down production and raising prices, this diminishes the economic service rendered by that industry; but what of it? If one can make more money by financially wrecking the railroad he controls than by furnishing transportation with it, if supplying the population with electricity is less lucrative than building financial jig-saw puzzles out of utility plants, there is no

real choice: the railroad is wrecked, the jig-saw puzzle built. A study of recent industrial history gives one the impression that such things as railroads and power plants exist in order that the dinosaurs of the financial world may have materials with which to play Building Empire.

The first commandment of modern business is that profit-seeking constitutes a department of life unto itself. And the second is like unto it, namely, that no outside consideration shall be allowed to interfere. There was every moral and social reason why the Tugwell food and drug bill, requiring among other things accurate and truthful advertising, should have been passed by our Congress in 1934. But the American Association of Advertising Agencies, the National Association of Broadcasters, the National Publishers Association, the Associated Manufacturers of Toilet Articles, the Association of National Retail Druggists, and similar august bodies, descended upon Washington and pointed out that the bill would deliver a mortal wound to the advertising business and cripple the sale of cosmetics and patent medicines. What the bill would have done for gullible, bull-dozed and suffering humanity was irrelevant and immaterial.

3. Another discrete entity produced by the modern revolution was the lordly individual. By the middle of the eighteenth century the idea had crystallized that the individual was an absolute and ultimate reality. Just as in the older physics the atom was the rock-bottom unit out of which all substance was thought to be composed, so was the individual the unit out of which society was made. According to J. J. Rousseau (1712-1778), society had been organized one day in the distant past by individuals who came together and entered into a "social contract." When Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)

dreamed his dream of man making himself more and more abundantly comfortable in the world until it should become like paradise, it was in terms of separate individuals that he thought. It was not new and more perfect forms of community that he pictured, but men growing "daily more happy, *each in himself*"; though he added that he thought each individual would become "more disposed to communicate this happiness to others." Ralph Waldo Emerson, much after the manner of Rousseau, thought in terms of cellular individuals. He viewed society as an evil "joint-stock company" in which the members agree for the better securing of their bread to surrender the liberty and culture of the divine individual. Society was "everywhere in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," and Emerson called for the cultivation of "godlike independence."

The individual emerged as the real and primary thing. Society was artificial and secondary. It was an abstraction or a figure of speech. For where was Society, or where was Man? The only thing you could lay your finger upon was individual men. Literally speaking, there could be no such thing as "social improvement"; there could be only the improvement of individuals. What was called social improvement was simply a convenient way of naming the general result of improved individuals. And this was true whether you were thinking in moral terms, or in economic terms, or in any terms. The individual was the cardinal thing. He alone was real.

This metaphysic gave sovereignty to the individual, made him a law unto himself. Thus living was seen as deriving its significance, not from one's relationship to a community or from subordination to some universal

end or ideal, but from the realization of individuality, from the expression of a man's desire for gain, glory and power. His personal success became the reasonable and proper goal for each man. The result has been a completely unphilosophical philosophy of conduct, beautifully illustrated by Dale Carnegie's manual on *How to Win Friends and Influence People* or by the career of Samuel Insull. Success being the goal, you concentrate solely upon the technique of getting what you are seeking. If you make a mockery of friendship and play your fellows for a bunch of suckers, the end justifies the means, because you are after a supreme prize — success.

4. The ivory tower of the scientist and technician has already been referred to. Science was one of the first phases of human activity to set up its own administration and repudiate all homage to an outside ideal. The situation is neatly described by two Associated Press dispatches.

An announcement from Schenectady, New York, appearing in the *New York Times* for December 12, 1935, declared that research in the field of television promised to yield a method for creating "silent areas." Electrical Engineer Andrew W. Cruse pointed out that this would be useful in throwing a shroud of silence around homes, hospitals and factories; also, that the same knowledge would be a "big aid" in warfare. Science, being above politics and aloof from such metaphysical matters as moral values, pretends to be unconcerned whether its findings are used to improve hospitals or to make people need hospitalization.

The other dispatch is from Westfield, New Jersey, and was published in the *Washington Evening Star*:

J. Walter Christie, seventy-year-old inventor, ran his hand lovingly along the steel top of an army tank and said, "Here



she is — the fastest land weapon anyone has ever seen. It's taken me five years and all my money to build her. I hope her only use is for peace." <sup>4</sup>

### III

The fate of Christianity in this unfolding of the modern plot was to shrink and shrink until it too became a compartment. Its business became "spiritual" matters, and when the spiritual is compartmentalized it becomes ethereal. He who was once the master of the whole house of life became the prisoner of a small closet; and he was made to run errands for the more powerful members of the household. Being deprived of all right to ordain the ends of living, Christianity (or what was left of it) was forced to serve the ends set up by secular authorities. Partly in self-defense, and partly from infection and conversion, it capitulated and played the part of chaplain in the court of its conqueror. The conqueror, like the *nouveau riche* who loves old splendors and ties with antiquity, was quite willing to receive baptism at the hands of the chaplain; and the chaplain appeared happy enough to perform the rite in exchange for a respectable place at the monarch's table. Christianity at last ceased to count, except as it supplied a vague moral backing for Civilization and Progress, and christened the children of Big Business, Nationalism and Success. It ceased to make any unique gesture beneath the sun; it raised no fundamental criticisms, clung to no contrary scheme of values, became unable to claim any distinct contribution, and fell into apologizing for its theological heritage.

This was a gradual and imperceptible development, of course. For many years after the die had been cast, Christianity continued to shed reflections upon the life around it. Van Wyck Brooks cites the case of a Boston



merchant of the early nineteenth century who, when one of his ships was overdue, found himself to be more worried about his thoughts than about the money he was losing. Was it possible, he asked himself, that he had grown to love money more for itself than for its noble uses? (The hangover of a pre-modern point of view.) To settle the point in his own mind (since he was Protestant, conscience rather than priest and canon law was the arbiter), he reckoned the value of the ship and cargo and gave the sum to his favorite charity. But an exclamation by an English churchman two hundred years earlier indicated plainly enough the general direction of the modern trade wind: "Poor sillie Church of Christ that could never finde a lawfull usurie until this golden age wherein we live!" It was a relatively long time, however, before it could be said, as Moderator Joseph A. Vance of the Presbyterian Church in the United States informed Governor Landon of Kansas in 1936, that "only the hysterical" among clergymen questioned the profit motive.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Bennett, *Christianity and Our World* (Association Press, 1936), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> W. Somerset Maugham in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Jan. 29, 1938, p. 4. These statements are repeated in his *The Summing Up* (Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1938).

<sup>3</sup> Rose Macaulay, *I Would Be Private* (Harper & Bros., 1937).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in the *New Republic*, Jan. 19, 1938, p. 312.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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### Was Protestantism the Culprit?

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IT IS NOW customary to look back and perceive that Protestantism provided the spiritual façade behind which individualism, nationalism, agnosticism and lay interests were stealthily nurtured. "The adaptable spirit of Protestantism," George Santayana has said, "may be relied upon to lend a pious and philosophical sanction to any instinct that may deeply move the national mind." Latter-day historians frequently interpret the Reformation in such a light.

This picture is plausible because it fits a number of facts. But there are several serious flaws in the thesis. For one thing, the Puritan movement in Protestantism, while it did give aid and comfort to the rising middle class, actually established a more rigorous social discipline than the mother church had been maintaining. "A godly discipline," says Tawney, "was indeed the very ark of the Puritan covenant."<sup>1</sup> And Mr. Santayana himself, in *The Last Puritan*, accuses that tribe of anything but a spirit of accommodation. It can be argued with good point that Protestantism undertook the enforcement of its disciplines on a basis that was sure to fail in the end. It repudiated the existing machinery of the canon law and the ecclesiastical courts, substituting conscience and spiritual penalties. Done in reaction to the corruption to which the church had suc-

cumbed, this was understandable enough; but it proved to be unrealistic.

For another thing, why blame Protestantism when the Roman Church has exhibited a similar willingness and capacity to make a deal with lay interests and powers? Catholic France made significant contributions to the decline of Christianity as well as did Protestant England; and through the agency of the Jesuits Rome went to scandalous lengths in relaxing its moral demands. Certainly there is nothing in the history of compromise and sycophancy that surpasses the support Mussolini has received at various times from the Italian hierarchy. On October 23, 1935, the cardinal archbishop of Milan, speaking in the cathedral in commemoration of the fascist march on Rome, said in part:

We who are part of the historic Italian drama can hardly have an appreciation of the importance of this date which opened a new chapter in the history of this peninsula, as well as in the history of the Catholic Church in Italy. With God, let us have faith in the national and Catholic mission, particularly since at this moment on the battlefields of Ethiopia the Italian flag is carrying to triumph the cross of Christ, breaking the chains of the slaves, and leveling the path of the missionaries of the gospel. Peace to the dead who died in doing their duty, in the faith and by the grace of Jesus Christ. Peace and protection to the valiant army which, in unquestioning obedience to the command of the country and at the price of its blood, is opening the gates of Ethiopia to the Catholic faith and to Roman civilization.

After his address the cardinal archbishop blessed the battle flags and machine guns of the blackshirts, and sent them on "their mission."

A remarkable effort to enter a deal with Hitler was made by the Austrian bishops, led by Cardinal Innitzer,

following the nazi seizure of that country. For reasons which remain obscure the effort went awry, but it is worth recording. On Sunday, March 27, 1938, the following declaration was read in all Austrian churches of the Roman faith:

After thorough deliberation we, the bishops of Austria, have decided to issue an appeal to our faithful in this historic moment for the Austrian people. We do this in the realization that the thousand-year-old longing for the unification of the German people has been fulfilled.

We, moreover, do this free from anxiety, as Chancellor Hitler's representative, Herr Buerckel, has indicated the lines of his policy to us by referring to the words of the Savior, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's."

We, the undersigned bishops for the Austrian dioceses, of free will do solemnly declare, at this historical moment, for German Austria.

We joyfully recognize that the National Socialist movement has produced preeminent accomplishments toward the national and economic reconstruction as well as the social welfare of the German Reich and people, particularly for the poorer classes.

We are also convinced that the National Socialist movement will avert the danger of atheistic and destructive communism. The bishops bless this activity for the future and admonish the faithful to do the same.

On Plebiscite Day (April 10) it will be a self-evident and national duty for us bishops to profess ourselves as Germans and for the German Reich. We expect all faithful Christians to take cognizance of what they owe their people.

After quoting this document I need hardly point out that Hitler has encountered far more stubborn resistance among the Confessional parsons than among the

Roman Catholic prelates in his attempt to get a completely servile church.

However, it is my opinion that this controversy only obscures the truth. The breakup of the medieval system was inevitable. For one thing, Christendom had crystallized too soon, including too small an area in too large and varied a world, so that the interactions between outside and inside were bound in time to bring changes in the character of both. To cite one instance, there were the Moslems who all but shut off Europe's contacts with the east and the south, causing the Mediterranean to become by the fifteenth century a stagnant lake, and contributing toward the shift of power and influence from Italy to the Low Countries.

Such changes were fatal for the medieval system. That system was devised for a static world and was of the essence of inflexibility. Its authoritarian nature was its vulnerable spot in the hour of crisis. Claiming to have full knowledge of the will of God, the church had deduced a complex body of specific and detailed social regulations from that knowledge, and had thus related God too neatly to concrete situations, attributing absoluteness to matters which are necessarily relative. The result was an untenable position which was concealed for a time by the casuistry of the "corporation lawyer." The wholesale vending of indulgences, which especially aroused the spleen of Martin Luther, was an example of the church's trying to make allowances for practices which its rules could really not allow. When the great discoveries were made across the western ocean opportunities arose, impulses were released, practices were required, a new outlook dawned, in the presence of which the molds of the medieval system were as helpless as the hoops and staves on a keg of ignited dynamite.



The church was so firmly caught in its own authority, so hopelessly embalmed in its own traditions and vested interests, that it could not serve as a channel through which the new energies might pour. Another organization had to arise to serve the new needs, and this organization happened to be the nation-state.

Christendom collapsed not because it had traitors to harbor the enemy, but because it contained inherent weaknesses, and because the enemy was strong enough to force one compromise after another until these concessions added up to an abject surrender. We really do not understand what happened to Christianity in the modern epoch until we see that it was overwhelmed and supplanted by another religion, by an evangelical secularism which took over all the claims and functions of its predecessor.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, p. 213.



## The Lyrical Modern Epoch

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IF THE Middle Ages were a period of faith, the modern age has been a period of faith-plus, an age of exuberant optimism. The energies which cracked the crust of the medieval order to rear their heads and arms toward heaven in a new Tower-of-Babel gesture — science, capitalism, nationalism, liberalism, rationalism, laissez faire, secularism, education, imperialism, humanitarianism — seemed brilliant beyond anything man had ever known. Their accomplishments were dazzling, their promise had no adjective to describe it. They brought undreamed-of power, knowledge, wealth, opportunity and social change. They opened up such a shimmering vista of new possibilities that the sense of the impossible was put away as a savage superstition or a priestly tyranny. They generated a faith, hope, philosophy, social order and scheme of values all their own, filling man with belief in himself and his world. They produced (or comprised) a new dispensation in comparison with whose light all other ages were as darkness. They brought the Enlightenment. They placed man on the topmost level of Comte's three stages of human development. They opened Lessing's Third Age of the Reign of the Spirit and the Eternal Gospel. They made possible what Kant called the exit of mankind from the tutelage of a child. They brought the Age of Reason, of Humanity, of Progress — of whatever shining qual-

ity one might name. The story of their rise and triumph should be told in heroic couplets, or recited in reeling psalms.

Different men in different periods caught the great light in different vessels. Some saw the means of grace flowing through one channel, others saw something else as making man powerful unto salvation. But these differences only added a variegated luster to the one huge gem of modern faith. There was one general agreement: Man had been unbound and was on the way toward a New Eden, and this new freedom drew no strength from the past but rather consisted in wholesale repudiation of the past.

## II

In the early 1600's Francis Bacon wrote: "If my judgment be of any weight, the use of history mechanical is of all others the most . . . operative to the endowment and benefit of man's life." His utopia was a place where every encouragement was extended to the study and advancement of science, and where the technician, the chemist, the inventor, the engineer, the astronomer, the physicist, the biologist ruled. The philosopher, the statesman, the saint, the artist and teacher were significantly left out of account. Utopia's governors were seekers and knowers of "causes and secret motions of things"; their aim was "the enlargement of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible." These men constituted the sacred Order of Solomon's House, for whose "ordinance and rites" there were two galleries: in one "we place patterns and samples of all manner of the more rare and excellent inventions; in the other we place the statues of all the principal inventors."

Adam Smith (1723-90), Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) and the French economists (the "Physiocrats") saw man achieving terrestrial bliss through the multiplication of material goods and the increase of liberty to enjoy them. As one of the Physiocrats put it, "Humanly speaking, the greatest happiness possible for us consists in the greatest possible abundance of objects suitable to our enjoyment and in the greatest liberty to profit by them." Priestley anticipated that "men will make their situation in this world abundantly more easy and comfortable. . . . Thus, whatever the beginning of the world, the end will be glorious and paradisiacal beyond what our imaginations can conceive." <sup>1</sup>

Helvetius (1715-71), assuming the infinite malleability of human nature by education and institutions, believed that through the proper ordering of society all intellectual and moral inequalities among men would be eradicated. Thus the lowest and the meanest could become equal to the best, and the best could become better and better until nothing but sweetness and light would encompass the earth.

Condorcet (1743-94) saw the augmentation of knowledge as the clue to the march of the human race. History, he thought, established the fact of progress, and indicated unmistakably that nature has set no limits to advance in human perfectibility. There could be no relapse into barbarism, because man had now discovered the true methods in the physical sciences, had learned how to apply knowledge to human needs, had constructed far-flung lines of communication, and had mastered the art of printing. Condorcet's life proved that this was no mere speculation with him, but a living faith. When he became involved in the French Revolution, his views in the convention were thought to be too radical

for the practical exigencies of governmental policy, so that he was forced to flee for his safety, to remain hidden in the back room of a dingy restaurant, and finally to commit suicide in order to escape the guillotine. Yet, as he was being destroyed by the very forces he had helped to loose, he thought only of the wondrous vision of progress for the whole human race. While hiding from his enemies he composed his great testament and consolation, *The History of the Progress of the Human Spirit*, from which one passage is particularly worth quoting:

What a picture of the human race, freed from its chains, removed from the empire of chance as from that of the enemies of its progress, and advancing with firm and certain step on the pathway of truth, of virtue and of happiness, is presented to the philosopher to console him for the errors, the crimes and the injustices with which the earth is still soiled and of which he is often the victim! It is in contemplating this vision that he receives the reward of his efforts for the progress of reason, for the defense of liberty. He dares then to link them to the eternal chain of human destiny; it is there that he finds the true recompense of virtue, the pleasure of having created a lasting good. . . . This contemplation is for him an asylum whither the memory of his persecutors cannot pursue him.<sup>2</sup>

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) opined that the new dispensation had been brought by science. He saw man's gropings moving through three stages of mental development:

At first the subject was conceived in the *theological* fashion, and all problems were explained by the will of some deity — as when the stars were gods or the chariots of gods; later, the same subject reached the *metaphysical* stage, and



was explained by metaphysical abstractions — as when the stars moved in circles because circles were the most perfect figure; finally, the subject was reduced to *positive science*<sup>3</sup>

by precise observation, hypothesis and experiment, and its data were explained by natural cause and effect. In the final stage man is able to walk with firm and certain step toward the goal of his desires.

After the formulation of the evolutionary theory by Darwin in 1859, the sky opened and a rosy and golden light descended upon all the blooming, buzzing confusion of the world. "Accumulated evidence," wrote Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) without a wince, "is gradually generating the conviction that, in the moral as in the material world, events are not at bottom fortuitous, but are wrought out in a certain inevitable way by unchanging forces."<sup>4</sup> Man, after patient study, is now able to discern in this apparent chaos of phenomena

the dim outlines of a gigantic plan. No accidents, no chance, but everywhere order and completeness. . . . Always toward perfection is the mighty movement — towards a complete development and a more unmixed good; subordinating in its universality all petty irregularities and fallings back, as the curvature of the earth subordinates mountains and valleys. Even in evils the student learns to recognize only a struggling beneficence. But above all he is struck with the inherent sufficingness of things. . . . The ultimate development of the ideal man is logically certain — as certain as any conclusion in which we place the most implicit faith; for instance, that all men will die. . . . Progress is not an accident but a necessity.<sup>5</sup>

Underneath were the Everlasting Arms of the Law of Evolution.

How did it work? Briefly, like this: First, there is

the law of indefinite variation which applies to all the creations of nature, including man. Then, by the process of "natural selection" or "the survival of the fittest" the maladjusted or unfit varieties are weeded out. Thus, in the long run, imperfection is destroyed and the perfect preserved.

## III

No further testimony to the spiritual victory of the energies that charged and shaped the modern Western world need be given. Whatever the angle of approach, all roads led to sublime faith in the new forces that had been released. "Hark! there is one calling. Prepare ye in the wilderness the way; make level in the desert a highway. The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places a plain. A glory shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad, and the desert shall blossom as the rose; it shall blossom and rejoice with the joy of singing. So up with your weak hands, and strengthen the feeble knees! Say to them that are of a fearful heart: Be strong! For behold, salvation will come."<sup>6</sup> It was as if this prophecy were being fulfilled in the very midst of the modern epoch.

The last barricading door to the unfulfilled was being battered down. Science was putting ignorance to flight, and pursuing mystery to its last stand; the printing press and the school were dispelling superstition, thus destroying the foundation of tyranny and sterilizing the soil that nourished evil; invention was devising ever more powerful and subtle implements for making nature yield up her resources and become the servant of man; individual initiative, freed from all stifling regimentation, was daily pouring its dynamic into the veins of com-

merce; political democracy, guaranteeing liberty and establishing the means of continuous social reform in the popular ballot, was spreading; nationalism was bringing the people into their sovereign rights and creating a cohesive will among great aggregates of population; imperialism was bearing the white man's burden of civilization into benighted zones; the overarching law of evolution saw to it that nothing walked "with aimless feet." Well might Tennyson exclaim, "Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change!"

William Ellery Channing, who was one of the saints rather than one of the prophets of his time, indicated in a restrained way what it was like to be alive in the middle of the nineteenth century in his address on "The Present Age" before the Mercantile Library Company of Philadelphia in 1841. In looking at our age, said Channing, an observer must be struck immediately with one commanding characteristic; and that is, the tendency in all its movements to expansion, to diffusion, to universality. This tendency is directly opposed to the spirit of exclusiveness, restriction, narrowness, monopoly, which has prevailed in past ages. Human action is now freer, more unconfined. All goods, advantages, helps, are more open to all. See how this is illustrated on all sides. Is science locked up in a few colleges? No; she has left her select company of votaries, and with familiar tone begun the work of instructing the race. What is true of science is true of literature: books are now placed within the reach of all; genius sends its light into cottages. Note also the prevalence of democracy—the endless self-expression before all sorts of assemblies; the generous toleration for differences of opinion; the dominance of popular institutions, the dominance of the people in public affairs. And finally, there is industry, assuming

its numberless forms, rushing into all departments of trade. Commerce no longer creeps along the shore, or lingers in accustomed tracks, but penetrates into every inlet, plunges into the heart of uncivilized lands, girdles the earth with steamships and railroads, and thus breaks down the estrangement of nations. Commerce is a noble calling. It mediates between distant countries, making for peace. The universal intellectual activity of the times, the spread of ideas and inventions, is due in no small degree to commerce. So does it carry along the missionary, the Bible and the cross. (In fairness to Channing, it should be said that he paused here to give sharp warning against some of the more flagrant abuses of this "noble calling.") In conclusion:

Amidst the prevalence of crime and selfishness, there has sprung up in the human heart a sentiment or principle unknown in earlier ages, an enlarged and trustful philanthropy which recognizes the right of every human being, which is stirred by the terrible oppressions and corruptions of the world, and which does not shrink from conflict with evil in its worst forms. There has sprung up too a faith, of which antiquity knew nothing, in the final victory of truth and right, in the elevation of men to a clearer intelligence, to more fraternal union, and to a purer worship. This faith is taking its place among the great springs of human action, is becoming even a passion in more fervent spirits. I hail it as a prophecy which is to fulfill itself.

Yes, more fervent spirits foresaw a world in which there would be no need for a hospital, a policeman, a fly-swatter or a drink of whisky. Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, credulous agnostic, used to pick his audiences up by their coat-tails and fling them out among the stars with this "Vision of the Future":



I see a world where thrones have crumbled and where kings are dust. The aristocracy of idleness has perished from the earth. I see a world without a slave. Man at last is free. Nature's forces have by science been enslaved. Lightning and light, wind and wave, frost and fire, and all the secret subtle powers of the earth and air have become the tireless toilers for the human race. I see a world at peace, adorned with every form of art, with music's myriad voices thrilled, while lips are rich with words of love and truth — a world in which no exile sighs, no prisoner mourns . . . a world where labor reaps its full reward, where work and worth go hand in hand. I see a world without the beggar's outstretched palm, the miser's heartless stony stare, the piteous wail of want, the livid lips of lies, the cruel eyes of scorn. I see a race without disease of flesh or brain — shapely and fair, married harmony of form and function — and as I look, life lengthens, joy deepens, love canopies the earth; and over all in the great dome shines the eternal star of human hope.

Dostoevsky, that half-mad Russian genius, wrote much the same thing in 1880, though with a difference to be presently noted. In *The Brothers Karamazov* we find these words:

Oh, blind race of men who have no understanding! As soon as men have all of them denied God — and I believe that period, analogous with geologic periods, will come to pass — the old conception of the universe will fall of itself . . . and everything will begin anew. Men will unite to take from life all it can give, but only for joy and happiness in the present world. Man will be lifted up with a spirit of divine titanic pride and the man-god will appear. From hour to hour extending his conquest of nature infinitely by his will and his science, man will feel such lofty joy in doing it that it will make up for all his old dreams of the joys of heaven.



But Dostoevsky had the insight to place this speech in the mouth of the devil appearing to Ivan Karamazov in a delirious dream.

## IV

The Modern Spirit, Civilization and Progress constituted a triune godhead. Their goodness and glory were original and intrinsic. In their light everything was judged. Whatever expressed or made way for the modern spirit, whatever spread civilization and ministered to progress, was thrice blessed. No crime was criminal, no evil was bad, if it was committed in the name of the holy trinity. Sydney Smith (1771-1845) could rail at his British compatriots:

If the Bible is universally diffused in Hindustan, what must be the astonishment of the natives to find that we are forbidden to rob, murder and steal; we who, in fifty years, have extended our empire from a few acres about Madras over the whole peninsula and sixty millions of people, and exemplified in our public conduct every crime of which human nature is capable. What matchless impudence to follow up such practices with such precepts! If we have common prudence, let us keep the gospel at home, and tell them that Machiavelli is our prophet, and the god of the Manicheans our deity.

Smith's countrymen laughed at that as humor. They did not have common prudence, for they were under an enchantment: they were spreading civilization, ministering to progress, expressing the regenerative impulses of the modern spirit, bearing the white man's burden.

The proud Industrial Revolution which occurred in England in the latter half of the eighteenth century actually produced a "new barbarism." Towns and cities were made dirty and sunless; new and more vicious

forms of dependence, insecurity, poverty and degradation were created for the working class; organic patterns of living were desiccated; human beings were lavishly sacrificed to the mine and the mill and the profits of their owners. Bleak valleys that supplied water power, and dirtier and bleaker valleys that disclosed seams of coal, became the environment of the new industrialism. A landless, traditionless and utterly dependent proletariat was drawn into these new areas and put to work in these new industries. These clusters of population about the mine and the mill, barren of everything that normally enriches life, knew nothing but steady, unremitting toil. The work was monotonous, the environment was sordid, the life in these new centers was empty and barbarous to the last degree. "Here the break with the past was complete. People lived and died within sight of the coal pit or the cotton mill in which they spent fourteen to sixteen hours of their daily life, lived and died without either memory or hope, happy for the crusts that kept them alive or the sleep that brought them the uneasy solace of dreams." The cities of the thirteenth century were brighter and cleaner and better ordered than the new towns of the nineteenth century; even hospitals in the former time were more spacious and sanitary than in the latter; the medieval worker in most parts of Europe enjoyed a much higher standard of living and led a more meaningful existence than his modern successor.<sup>7</sup>

The treason to life of which the roaring young capitalism was guilty is graphically symbolized in the adulteration of food. "Under the stress of competition," writes Lewis Mumford,

adulterants in food became a commonplace of Victorian industry: flour was supplemented with plaster, pepper with

wood, rancid bacon was treated with boric acid, milk was kept from souring with embalming fluid, and thousands of medical nostrums flourished under the protection of patents, bilge-water or poison whose sole efficacy resided in the autohypnotism produced by the glowing lies on their labels.<sup>8</sup>

Did such facts besmirch the modern picture, or cause any doubts to arise? Not at all. They were too well covered by the sheen of civilization and progress. At worst they were the growing pains of the modern spirit.

Progress was neither an assumption nor a faith to those who lived under its spell; it was a self-evident fact, a reality which every right-minded person experienced daily. As a young telegraph operator in America, Andrew Carnegie wrote back breathlessly to his relatives in Scotland:

Our public lands of almost unlimited extent are becoming settled with an enterprising people. Our dense forests are falling under the ax of the hardy woodsman. The wolf and the buffalo are startled by the shrill scream of the Iron Horse where a few years ago they roamed undisturbed. Towns and cities spring up as if by magic. . . . Our railroads extend thirteen thousand miles. You cannot supply iron fast enough to keep us going. This country is completely cut up with railroad tracks, telegraph lines and canals. . . . Everything around us is in motion.<sup>9</sup>

Had some unpublic-spirited Socrates, such as Henry Thoreau, asked Carnegie just what was the point and purpose of all this motion around him, and had Carnegie bothered to answer such a patently silly question, he would have said, "Why, you fool, all this is progress!" And in the eyes of all but Socrates that answer would have been sufficient and final. Did all this change, expansion, speed and power mean a spiritual


*motion  
progress*

enhancement or a promotion of moral values? The wealth and technology of Rome, one might have reflected, were superior to those of Greece; yet Rome produced no art, ethics, philosophy and manner of living comparable to those of her predecessor: were the greater wealth and superior technics of modern times producing a proportionate expansion and nourishment of life? The question was not asked. The age derived its meaning and splendor from the fact that it ministered to progress and civilization, and one did not examine those postulates.

## v

Is it any wonder that Christianity paled and expired before this purple-bannered, million-trumpeted onslaught; that it came to lead a ghostly existence in a world which claimed to take small stock in ghosts? What men had postponed to an indefinite future, or had imagined to exist in some golden age of the past, the prophets of the modern epoch proclaimed to be realizable here and now. "The Kingdom of God is now in your midst," they declared — only they did not call it the Kingdom of God. Of course, any cult which can make that claim, and make it plausibly, can force all others to accept its authority.

The cult of modernity did believe in ghosts, or at any rate in spirits. While characterizing such things as delusions, it nevertheless affirmed the rocklike reality of its own spiritual essences. For instance, there was the omniscient Scientific Spirit; there was the saving grace of Education; there was the cleansing and ennobling Spirit of Patriotism; there was the "redemptive and regenerative Influence of Business." Such deities comprised a modern pantheon, each with its own mythology, hagi-





ography, rituals and special votaries. For purposes of illustration, let us consider briefly, and in more or less helter-skelter fashion, some of the web of poetry and metaphysics which business wove about itself.

Business had a lot to overcome. It was traditionally suspect. From time immemorial the business man had a rating only slightly above the peasant, while morally he was about two notches removed from the criminal. The practice of trade was seen as fraught with such strong temptations that it was assumed a priori that a trader was a usurer, a miser and a man of avarice. But the merchandising, banking and manufacturing class became so powerful after the Middle Ages came to an end; their activities assumed such a central place in, and became such a major characteristic of, the modern epoch, that they turned the tables completely, reorganized the scheme of values, proclaimed a new revelation, a new incarnation and a new covenant, and supplanted the priest, philosopher, warrior and statesman.

Business produced a new anthropology, psychology, sociology, ethic and theology to prove and glorify itself. It invented the "economic man." It assumed the insatiability of human wants in the mass, yet a reasonable satiability of the wants of the individual. In the first "fact of nature" the dynamics of progress were found, and in the second the joy of living. Thus the acquisitive impulses, which St. Paul had called "the root of all evil," were the very force that made the wheels go round. Avarice was ambition. Jesus' observation about the wild birds, which neither sow nor reap nor hoard anything in granaries, yet are fed, was replaced by the maxim that the early bird catches the worm. The winning of wealth, far from being a sinful occupation, was actually a service to the community through that won-

and  
Theodore  
Wells  
white



derful arrangement of Providence whereby "the general scramble of self-interests canceled off as collective welfare."<sup>10</sup> As Alexander Pope epitomized it,

Thus God and Nature formed the general frame,  
And bade self-love and social be the same.

Or as *Easy Lessons on Money Matters for the Use of Young People* declared: "It is curious to observe how, through the wise and beneficent arrangements of Providence, men thus do the greatest service to the public when they are thinking of nothing but their own gain." Nor did there need to be any regulation, or social policy, or governmental interference with regard to economic affairs. For there was a body of economic laws operating in nature, as silently but as effectively as the law of gravitation, to guarantee that commodities got produced and distributed in the right way. For example, the great law of supply and demand determined what would be produced, how much, and where. The law of competition would see to it that prices did not get too high. And there was the "iron law of wages" which precluded idealistic theories and humanitarian considerations.

The interests of the business man were not the sordid interests of a special group or class, such as the interests of a labor union, but the interests of the whole community. "What helps business helps you, and what hurts business injures the whole country." Business is just the community. Or business is just a smiling public service. As the Rotary Club states it: "He who serves best profits most." Indeed, "commerce," to quote Channing again, "is a Noble Calling."

Even those consciously prevaricating servants of business, the advertising men, see themselves as unwilling agents of natural law and as unhappy ministers to public

good. A few years ago an uneasy bird of this feather wrote an article <sup>11</sup> in which he suggested that the slogan "Truth in Advertising" was proposed to the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World by a practical joker. He called advertising the "Sacred Order of Exaggeration" and admitted that its purpose is the insinuation of falsehoods. He confessed that the copywriters who grind out the alliterative grist which stirs false hopes in the hearts of millions "have nothing save a doubtful income, a muddled sense of shame, a heartful of shattered ideals, and a profound faith in the futility of existence. To them, mathematics itself is a hoax, logic a racket, faith a side show, and truth the supreme harlequinade." His argument, stated in my own words, ran as follows: "Sure, I'm in the advertising game, and I admit that we don't attempt to tell the truth; truth isn't our line. Nevertheless, we advertising men perform a function that is indispensable to the happiness of mankind. Life wouldn't be endurable if everyone spoke the truth and faced the truth. Thanks to us, there is still alive in the world one lone champion of the glorious and necessary banner of illusion."

From the standpoint of a critical academician, let us say, it looks as if business did an astute piece of pulling the wool over the eyes of the modern world, perpetrated one of the greatest propaganda hoaxes in history. But no. A man like William Ellery Channing cannot be accused of being either a party to, or a gullible victim of, anything quite like that. What happened was that commerce has been one of the major activities, perhaps *the* major activity, of the modern epoch, and the man of commerce the most prominent and powerful figure. Major activities naturally sing of themselves and are sung about, spin cocoons of myth and lore; and men of

prominence and power naturally emanate a heroic and mysterious aura. There is nothing cooked-up about it — until a period of transition or the dawn of a new epoch calls those men and their activity in question. Then the myth begins to look like a fiction and the heroes like stuffed shirts, and the god is perceived to have feet of clay. Only then does your deliberate propaganda come. Previously to that it's honest education, or the formulation of self-evident truth.

Not only did Channing, who was not a trader and who was certainly a man of very high intelligence and keen perception, see commerce as a noble calling; but so did another great figure of the nineteenth century, who was not a trader but a scientist: Alfred Russell Wallace.

In 1857 Wallace was in the Aru Islands (southwest from New Guinea) collecting bugs, butterflies, birds of paradise and what not, and while staying at the trading station of Dobbo, which was inhabited for only a short period of each year, he found himself surrounded by what he considered a "motley, ignorant, bloodthirsty, thievish population" living "without a shadow of government." Yet he noted that "they do not cut each other's throats, do not plunder each other day and night, nor fall into the anarchy such a state of things might be supposed to lead to." And why not? Said Wallace: "Here we may behold in its simplest form *the genius of Commerce at the work of Civilization. Trade is the magic that keeps all at peace, and unites these discordant elements into a well behaved community.*" Just read that over three times and see how many factors Wallace failed to consider in arriving at that conclusion, how much of reality he had to exclude, and how many assumptions are involved. This is guaranteed to afford intellectual entertainment and spiritual profit for a

whole winter's evening. And if you want to spend a second evening on it, you might transcribe the statement into blank verse or a sonnet, for the idea is essentially poetical. Yet Wallace thought he was recording the most obvious of facts.

A year later he went to New Guinea, where he met two German missionaries living on a small island that hugged the coast near the village of Dorey. As it was his wont to observe everything, Wallace wrote down in his journal what he considered the salient features of this mission. There is one feature, he noted,

which I believe will materially interfere with its moral effect. The missionaries are allowed to trade to eke out the small salaries granted them from Europe, and of course are obliged to carry out the trade principle of buying cheap and selling dear, in order to make a profit. Like all savages, the natives are quite careless of the future, and when their small rice crops are gathered they bring a large portion of it to the missionaries, and sell it for knives, beads, axes, tobacco, or other articles. A few months later, in the wet season, when food is scarce, they come to buy it back again, and give in exchange tortoise shell, tripang, wild nutmegs, or other produce. Of course the rice is sold at a much higher rate than it was bought, as is perfectly fair and just — and the operation is on the whole beneficial to the natives, who would otherwise consume and waste their food when it is abundant, and then starve — yet I cannot imagine that the natives see it in this light. They must look upon the trading mission with some suspicion, and cannot feel so sure of their teachings being disinterested.<sup>12</sup>

This passage gives a remarkable insight into the faith and theology of the secular religion of modern business by one who accepted it as a member of the British Tory party accepts the empire and the Anglican Church. The



system Wallace describes, with admirable honesty, plainly rooks the native both coming and going. Dazzled by the products of the white man's factories, he is induced to exchange ten dollars' worth of rice for two dollars' worth of articles (the ratio was considerably steeper when the Dutch were buying Long Island). Thus the trader is enabled to monopolize the native's staple food, his rice. The rice is then held in keeping, without the addition of anything to its value except the scarcity which the trader's possession alone creates. There is still plenty of rice, but it is locked up in the trader's warehouse, and a special ritual is required before it can be taken out and distributed. When the native gets hungry, he is forced to exchange ten dollars' worth of his labor and products for two dollars' worth of rice. All this, says Wallace, is "perfectly fair and just." Why? Because it is the "trade principle of buying cheap and selling dear." And why is the trade principle sacrosanct? This is somewhat like asking what the turtle which supports the elephant which supports the earth stands on; but if one must know, this trade principle is a law of nature, or of God. Is it a law of nature, or of God? That's being pig-headed and cantankerous. Of course it is! See how it works in this particular case. The natives, being savages, are careless of the future. If left to themselves they would consume and waste their food when it is abundant, and then starve. It is bad diplomacy for Christian missionaries to be applying the trade principle, because to the simple-minded natives it might easily appear that trade principle contradicts Christian principle. But it is nevertheless a beneficial system for the natives, since it enables them to live despite their suicidal folly. . . . One can only wonder how the peoples of New Guinea were kept from starving



through all those hundreds of years before this wonderful system was brought and applied to them.

Not only did business in general assert divine incarnation, but also particular businesses. For instance, the late Darwin P. Kingsley spoke of life insurance as "light" — a metaphor applied to deity in former ages; as "a plan that exalts life and defeats death" — nothing less than the claim of a savior. Sellers of life insurance were nothing less august than "life underwriters." On the occasion of Mr. Kingsley's passing, the *New York Times* said editorially that no one had been more eloquent or convincing in preaching the doctrine of "economic immortality." And a typical rhapsody on a banker's calendar tells me that when money is put into circulation "life and action follow its beneficent track," and that "banks are springs from which money flows out into channels of business and enterprise." Thus banks are sources of life. As the Iroquois said of their maize-god, he is "our life," he "sustains us."

Thus did the men of the modern epoch set up golden calves, go off after strange gods, and worship the work of their own hands.

## VI

What, I repeat, could have stood before this avalanche?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (The Macmillan Co., 1932), p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1926), pp. 383-84.

<sup>3</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (Simon & Schuster, 1926), p. 382.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 336-42.

<sup>6</sup> See Isa. 40:3-5; 35:1-4; Heb. 12:12.

<sup>7</sup> This paragraph is a transcription from Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934), p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934), p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Burke in the *New Republic*, Feb. 23, 1938, p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> "Truth in Advertising," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1933.

<sup>12</sup> A. R. Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago* (New York, 1869), pp. 498-99.



## Crisis in a Far Country

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**B**UT THERE IS a postscript to this story which may prove to be the prologue to a succeeding epoch. The postscript is that we citizens of modern culture have become more than disappointed with the outcome of modernity. We have been convicted of folly and failure. Once so self-confidently disparaging of everything with a pre-modern tincture, we have come into a frame of mind more appreciative of some old, cast-off and forgotten things.

Jesus of Nazareth once told a parable about a prodigal son. The problem he was considering in this parable was that of getting men to seek the Kingdom of God rather than the kingdoms of Caesar and of Mammon. With a great many people, perhaps with nearly all people, he implied, this is how it has to happen.

A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them, being impatient to receive his inheritance, said to his father, "Give me my share of the property." So the father divided his property between them. Having so much power placed suddenly at his disposal made the young man giddy. It dawned upon him in a fresh way that his father was his "old man," entertaining many absurd and repressive notions about life, and that the old home was insufferably cramping. So not many days thereafter he took his newly acquired wealth, severed his connections with his family, shook off the past, and

departed for a far country. There he spent his days in riotous living until his substance was dissipated. And when that happened the illusion was broken, for his style and philosophy of living contained no provision for an evil day, did not even recognize that life is fraught with elements which produce evil days. The young man's position became desolate. He began to be in want; and no one gave him any help, for his former friends were off looking for another mine to dig. From living by virtue of ownership he was now forced to live by virtue of labor, and it was labor in a sweated industry. He became a tender of pigs, and his wages were so low that he was hungry enough to fill his belly with the pods his wards were eating. When he had been reduced to this miserable level, when he had become so completely dispossessed that the very hope of gaining private security appeared as a cruel jeer, he "came to himself" and was ready to seek another type of life. "How many of my father's hired men," the former heir reflected, "have more than enough to eat, and here I am perishing of hunger!"

There is a striking analogy between that parable and the history of the last four centuries. Made giddy by the new-felt impulses of expanding capitalism, by the new-found powers of science, and by the vision of a style of life unhampered by immemorial limitations, modern men defied God and deified themselves, declared a self-sufficient independence, proclaimed mastery of fate and the power to effect salvation, and plunged into a manner of living in which one expected to gulp the cup of life's meaning dry and die gallantly with his boots on. Like the builders of the Tower of Babel, they said: "Come on, let us make a name for ourselves by building a city and a tower whose top reaches to heaven; thus will we

surmount all our weaknesses and dangers and frustrations, and ourselves become God." One who was brought up on that heady wine has expressed its intoxicating effects as follows:

Reaction set in against the old repressive view of human life. The awakening of personality was, as Burkhardt puts it, the great sign of the new time; and this awakening of personality meant not only, as we have said, the assertion of the individual's right to himself, but also the assertion of his right to the world. . . . Men went out into the world with a passionate determination to clutch at everything it contained, to avail themselves of all its opportunities, drink deep of all its knowledge, enjoy all its pleasures, make the most of themselves.<sup>1</sup>

It was a grand spree — until the luster of it all turned to canker. And how it cankered!

## II

One great secular confidence after another suffered a pitiful crumbling. For instance:

1. There was the confidence that the triumph of secular concepts and forces (the New Civilization) would lead to the establishment of a more genuinely universal community. The rooting out of "religious bigotry" by "disinterested intelligence" would make for the achievement of an ecumenical culture and civilization such as Christianity had once imagined but failed to realize. The rationalists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries believed that they were heading certainly toward a new cosmopolitanism. "They looked forward," says Carlton J. H. Hayes, "to a near future when the shadows of national difference would vanish in the clear light of reason and national citizen-



ship give way to world citizenship.”<sup>2</sup> “No more,” exclaimed Rousseau, “are there Frenchmen, Spaniards, Germans or even Englishmen; there are only Europeans. All have the same tastes, the same passions, the same customs.” It is now clear that Rousseau and his confreres were not reading the signs of a new day, but seeing the afterglow of medieval Christendom. Two hundred years later Professor Gilbert Murray asked a teacher from a certain country in the Near East what sort of international training his students were receiving, and the reply came: “My students are trained to be mad dogs.”<sup>3</sup>

Lessing, another hopeful spirit of Rousseau’s time, declared that “love of country is at best a heroic vice which I am quite content to be without.” Two hundred years afterward Professor Philipp Lenard, Nobel Prize winner and head of the Lenard Institute at Heidelberg, proclaims that “science is conditioned by race and blood”; and one of Lenard’s compatriots, Professor Johannes Stark, also a Nobel Prize winner, denounces “the Jewish propaganda that makes Einstein the biggest scientist of all times, and seeks to impose Jewish views as a measure of all things.”

The outcome, whatever the reasons for it may be, has been the dissolution of the world into such a grievous parochialism that the last vestiges of a common mind and of common standards are swiftly disappearing. Nations, races, classes and ideological groups, as the Oxford Conference stated it, “are arrayed against each other, armed with world views and standards of conduct so incompatible that their common humanity is obscured and respect for one another denied.”

2. In 1929 Professor Summerfield Baldwin came out with a book in a standard historical series which he called *The Organization of Medieval Christianity*. But he

bore down so heavily on the man's-mastery-of-his-fate note that the book might well have been entitled, "Modern Man's Conquest of Fear through Science, Leisure and Capitalism." He propounded a neat thesis: Religion originates in fear, and tends to be an important element in human life in inverse proportion to the presence of fear. Fear springs from the perception of things we do not understand, from "unknowns." The three great unknowns are "the movements of nature, death and strangers." The first of these unknowns has been dispelled by scientific understanding (scientific understanding having been made possible through leisure to study science, and leisure being given to us by the surplus of modern production). What has been done with death I don't recall — I think Professor Baldwin skipped that; but the fear of strangers has been eliminated by trade — with the result that the need for religion is on the way out:

Modern society . . . is too well organized, individuals are too much at peace with one another to pay more than passing attention to the priest with his doleful warnings, on the one hand, or his promises of celestial beautitude on the other. In a sense, society thus organized neither hopes nor fears. Principally, it desires. Hence, in modern times, ascendancy has passed from the sacerdotal type to one which at least promises to satisfy every human desire here and now.<sup>4</sup>

I do not know in what tight monastery on what unapproachable mountaintop Professor Baldwin has spent his life, but I presume that certain rumors concerning the state of things have finally intruded upon his solitary communion with the modern spirit.

Roll back the covering of contemporary life, and one

beholds a dark substratum of all-pervading fear — fear not simply of the unknown but also of the known. It is a world in which a little girl in the city of London is anxious because the government might not know about the new baby just arrived in her home, and so might fail to provide a gas mask for it; a world filled with defensive activities, dominated by distrust, deliberately capitalizing upon the sense of danger and spreading rumors of menace.\* People are afraid that they will lose their jobs; that they will be knifed by a competitor; that they will die and leave their families unprovided for; that they will never find a place in the world's economy. Some fear that their wealth will be confiscated or wiped out, and many others fear that they will be left to starve by slow degrees. With four out of every five persons who are gainfully employed receiving wages or salaries, and therefore dependent upon somebody else's say-so for their positions, few dare breathe their full honest breath for fear of being dismissed. Young people are so anxious about their security that they dare not have children, and governments encourage early marriages and the begetting of children in order that there may be more human wheat for the enemy's death machines to mow down. The only uncontested appropriations made by legislatures in recent years are for the instruments of mass slaughter. The League of Nations has advised the construction of bomb-proof cellars for storing away art treasures, in order that the surviving rats may gaze upon them and exclaim, "Ah, that must have been a great civilization!" This is the only advice offered by the league in recent years that is likely to be accepted.

\* These words were written almost a year before the European war broke out — when the world was enjoying "peace."

One of the latest inventions to win popularity in Hitler's Germany is the "spy monocle," which looks like the usual device of snobbery, but instead of being a lens is a mirror. Shoved into the eye socket at the proper angle, it permits the wearer to observe unobtrusively whether anybody is spying upon his conversation in search of treasonable utterances. According to recent findings of our National Labor Relations Board and of the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, this invention could be used to advantage by the workers in many of the major industries of this republic.

Witness the career of the late Sir Basil Zaharoff. Early in life he became a seller of the weapons of death, and discovered how fear could be employed to butter his bread on both sides. Back in the seventies he learned that one submarine sold to Greece could be used as a club for selling two submarines to Turkey, and with this formula he became one of the world's most glittering successes. From poverty and obscurity he rose to be one of the four wealthiest men of his time, and one of the most influential and highly honored personages. He was elevated, celebrated, decorated and praised by almost every government in Europe. Unlettered traveling salesman though he was, he was even granted a doctor's degree by Oxford University, a badge of merit that few accomplished scholars are deemed worthy to receive. This man who played upon fear and ministered to it, who did nothing for the world except to increase its distrusts and despairs — this man was one whom the nations delighted to honor and looked upon as a great benefactor. Such a spiritual deformity has our culture become.

3. Man, who set out in the Renaissance, according to Professor Hudson, to wake up and live, to assert his



right to himself and the world, to make the most of himself and show God how he should have done it back in the Garden of Eden, got along famously for a time, then fell into a bottomless gloom with regard to his ability to do anything or to be anything that didn't stink. In the literature of the 1920's men began calling themselves, their life and world all sorts of cynical, defeatist and contemptuous names. Man was a "poor, bare, forked animal" waddling futilely and vulgarly about on an insignificant mud ball. He was a figment of vibrant scum on a cosmic cinder. He was an insect crawling from one annihilation to another. He was a poor fish caught in a mechanical determinism of low desires. Life was a sordid physiological process. It was a "mole that burrows under the garden of our ideals, nipping off at the roots one plant after another." "It's Nothing," Edwin Arlington Robinson had the wise "Man from Stratford" say to Ben Jonson, "it's all Nothing."

These attitudes have come to be reflected in various phases of our living. There is a tendency to say toward every vision of social betterment, "Theoretically, that would be a fine thing, but human nature being what it is, such things can't be done." The distrust in democracy, the fear of the common people, the faith in dictatorship, the disbelief in world peace, the trust in armaments, are expressions of contempt for mankind.

4. The Modern Prodigal, it appears, has suffered the loss of the meaning of meaning. His science, which he had trusted as the key to all knowledge and truth, has been unable to discover any meaning or purpose inherent in the universe, so he has weened that he himself is the creator and source of value. As Stuart P. Sherman once put it: "I have long been inclined to believe . . . that life's meaning is only in the figure or



pattern which human volition marks and holds in place upon the surface of infinite chaos and darkness.”<sup>5</sup> That volition has faltered, and the infinite chaos and darkness have broken through. “We are not an especially gloomy lot,” writes Professor Erwin R. Goodenough with all the cheer he can muster, for we are capable of being stimulated

to an activity in which there is definite pleasure. It is rather in times between bursts of activity that we stop and become aware of our utter lack of direction, and, in times of perplexity, of our lack of standards of human value. That sort of life is by no means entirely or deeply satisfactory. We are aware that the life dedicated to preoccupations is not at all ideal, and occasionally almost everyone cries out within him for some experience of reality, permanent and secure. At times of great personal problems and disappointments the modern intellectual is broken-hearted as often as anyone else, and as deeply in need of a sense that he is not alone, lost in a meaningless and indifferent universe.<sup>6</sup>

No, it is not entirely satisfactory or ideal. It is, in fact, an untenable position.

### III

Consider further the condition of some of our formerly most trusted assets. It looks as if some super Insull, Whitney or Musica (alias Coster) had been playing around with them.

1. Our business and financial institutions — supposedly established in accordance with the laws of nature, Providence and progress — now stand out as the very things which prevent technology from giving us a life of material abundance. We have the physical resources, the productive instruments and the technical knowledge wherewith to satisfy our economic needs;

thirty millions of our people are living in real want — need better food, better houses, more clothes, more medical service. Yet our productive machine stumbles and balks. Curiously enough, its functioning depends upon something that is related neither to the needs of the people nor to the country's natural resources: to wit, upon the ability of the investor to make a profit for himself. It is as if a tribe of hungry Indians won't go out and hunt for buffalo when the seeds in the medicine-man's gourd fail to rattle auspiciously. But after a protracted period of belt-tightening the Indians are pretty sure to suspect that the oracular powers have gone out of the gourd, and that the medicine man has lost his standing with the spirits. In fact, this is what has come to pass. There is wide and mounting doubt that we can produce and distribute economic goods adequately within the framework of our business and financial establishment.

2. Our science has proved itself a neutral contribution, creating as many problems as it has solved — perhaps giving us the tools whereby we shall destroy our civilization. A few years ago, when it looked as if a group of physicists might succeed in discovering how to release the energy stored in the atom, the cry went up, "God forbid!" To be sure, the request for a moratorium on scientific discoveries is nothing but the counsel of despair. But it indicates a dawning realization that science is not the rod of Moses which the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thought it was.

3. The printing press and the spread of literacy, on which we once counted for the steady advancement of reason, democracy and enlightenment, has lost its halo. On a visit to this country in 1937 Aldous Huxley encountered the fact that a process had been discovered for

converting southern pine into newsprint, thereby reducing the cost of that product by almost one-half. "If only some benefactor of humanity," Mr. Huxley wailed, "would come along with a new process that would raise the price of newsprint ten or twenty times! Cheaper pulp means . . . more lies disseminated to a wider public, more minds filled with even worse drivel." <sup>7</sup>

While there is no help in Mr. Huxley's attitude, and nothing to be gained by his ironic suggestion, his feelings reflect a knowledge which has become general — namely, that the printing press and the spread of literacy in themselves imply nothing of benefit to humanity. Whereas Condorcet looked upon this invention as the great exorciser of the demons of ignorance, superstition and tyranny, and as one of the guarantees that humanity would move forward, we have seen those demons use the printing press to promote ignorance, superstition, vulgarity and tyranny. The key factor is: Who is using the printing press, and for what aim?

4. "Education" has waked up to the fact that, far from being the vanguard of a continuous movement of regeneration, it is stranded in a theoretical vacuum. The assumption that there exists a compartment of education wherein the teacher, enjoying the conditions of academic freedom, can impart to the rising generation the truth that shall free society from its past mistakes, is now seen as a piece of unworkable romance. There is actually no compartment of education: education is integral to the existing social and cultural order. And there is really no such thing as academic freedom, except outside academies: the official educational system is necessarily an effort of the *status quo* to preserve itself.

The supposition that the purpose and service of our

educational system is to instill pupils with the wisdom which shall enable them to make good choices amid the alternatives of life is close to an empty fiction. The choices of life are seldom made according to wisdom. Most often they are made according to the demands of existing social organizations. For example, it is neither wisdom nor the lack of it which induces a college graduate to enter the employment of a utility company that robs the public and fleeces its investors, but the fact that a needed job is open. And the biography of that person thereafter will be determined more by the nature of our business organizations than by his former "education." He will discard that portion of his "education" which conflicts with the necessities of earning his livelihood as so much "adolescent idealism," or become a split personality, or lose his job. What becomes of the vanguard of education? It takes its place, willingly or unwillingly, in the goosestep of the rank and file.

5. Our liberal-democratic-laissez-faire political system, wherein the "laws of nature" are trusted and the laws of legislatures distrusted, according to which each interest and activity has its own sovereign sphere and government governs best when it governs least; our neat arrangement of checks and balances and divided powers, wherein each department attends to its own business and God looks after the general welfare — this doesn't work out as well as it once seemed to.

The drunken peasant, escorted out of the saloon and helped into his cart, appeared able to drive home because he got there; but what actually carried him home was the horse. In like manner, the thing which has enabled us to get along so well in this country has not been the wisdom of the "American system" but the peculiar favor of our circumstances. So long as there



was a relatively small population in a vast sweep of territory teeming with untapped wealth; so long as there was an expanding market and no effective monopolies; so long as there was a wide-open space in which the unsuccessful, the squeezed-out and the dissatisfied might make a fresh start, we could dispense with a positive social policy and let the horse take us along. Enjoying an unprecedented amount of freedom, equality and opportunity, we supposed this was due to our "democratic" system — to our lack of social legislation, our let-alone policy, our two-party system, our balance between state and federal powers, our constitutional guarantees, our lack of a hereditary aristocracy, our universal male suffrage (after we got it). It was due, however, more to our undeveloped wilderness and to the infancy of capitalism. What was happening under this "system" — a system which had presumably found the road of endless progress, and would serve as the model for all peoples as soon as they should grow up to it — what was taking place was the growth of an unrecognized government and hereditary ruling class which the ballot box had no influence upon. Our great corporations are, for all practical purposes, feudal domains, and the barons who control them are feudal lords; and the millions who earn their doubtful livings by tending the lords' machines are retainers and serfs.<sup>8</sup>

6. Our spiritual theory that life is made rich through the emancipation of the individual from restraints and obligations, and is glorified by personal success, has faded like a dead tropical fish.

This happens to be one social-spiritual theory which has been thoroughly tried out. The typical dweller in a modern metropolis is about as free from outside authorities, bothersome duties and moral obligations as is



possible within our type of society. When away from his work he is free to do as he pleases so long as he does not flagrantly transgress the laws of the state. He has almost no organic ties to anybody except his wife and children, and not too many to the latter. He has no neighbors to whom he must respond in a neighborly way, only people who live in the apartment overhead and insist on moving pianos around every evening. His blood relatives are scattered all over the continent, so he has no obligations to them. Having moved away from his boyhood home and adopted a different manner of living, he is emancipated from ancestral traditions and folkways. No sense of community responsibility binds him, and he probably participates in no communal enterprises or ceremonies, because he doesn't live in a community but amid an aggregation of individuals dwelling in mechanical proximity. This man is almost ideally an independent individual; but somehow or other he has lost most of his independence and individuality. He is "free" in a negative sense: but his life is also freed from nearly all significant content. The result is a gnawing sense of boredom and emptiness which he seeks to overcome through commercialized pastimes and through immersion in crowds.

The odd fact is that nobody is more subject to mass hysteria and to absorption in the herd than this modern individual, for that is his method of stuffing the husk of his life with some content. Being robbed through isolation of the communal substance which we call meaning, he really has a less robust being than the primitive tribesman dominated by the traditions of his forefathers, molded by ancient folkways, cemented into his community by a complex scheme of obligations, loyalties, rituals and cooperative undertakings. This is one

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reason why our life has become cluttered with a multiplicity of organizations, clubs, associations and lodges, the profusion and confusion of which has never been approached before. And this is one reason why a mass madness can sweep across a country, why supposedly rugged individuals are aching to "die for dear old Alma," to kiss the big toe of a Man of Providence, to join a crusade. This is why millions can be captivated by a fad, why all of a sudden "everybody starts doing it," why a football game, a prize fight, a sordid crime or a sensational triviality can command the rapt attention of a whole nation.

Thus it is that modern culture has emphasized the individual and destroyed individuality; has cut the ties that bind us to one another and left us at loose ends; has isolated the individual only to collect him into mass manias and mobs. Our individualism has glimpsed only the negative half of the truth: the importance of liberating the individual from oppressive restrictions. This amounts to liberation in the direction of nothingness unless the other half of the truth is recognized — namely, that one man is no man, and that in order to free personality we must construct a community in which persons can achieve personality through being members one of another.

7. The attempt to find meaning in personal success, that great touchstone of our business religion, fails for the same reason that individualism fails. Sheer success relates a person in no organic way to anything that sustains our lives or gives them more than ephemeral significance. For example, a man may develop a new type of perfumed toilet paper and convince the great middle class that it is a social distinction to have it in their bathrooms. Or he may establish a monopoly on artificial

*Personal success*

squirrel tails and convince millions of boys, both little and big, that these are just the things to hang on the handle-bars of their bicycles and on the door-hinges and radiator-caps of their automobiles. And thereby he may become a success: his wife will be in a position to have ten thousand dollars' worth of jewels stolen from her bedroom; he will become known as a man of business vision, self-reliance and indefatigable energy; his daughter will be one of the season's photographed debutantes; by contributing fifty thousand dollars to a college he can become a doctor of something-or-other. To our goggle eyes it may appear that this man is feasting upon the most worthwhile things of life. But honestly, folks, when you peel off the layer of gold leaf, what is the meaning of it all? What is the significance of ten million artificial (or even genuine) squirrel tails streaming from bicycles and automobiles all over this country? In what important way has this man related himself to the larger life of which he is a part?

Success is a physical quantity. It simply means that a man's undertaking (whatever it may be) has prospered in such a way as to bring him a private advantage in the form of relatively large wealth, or more than average social power and prestige, or both. This may be adequately expressed algebraically: *Success = (What-I-am-doing-in-the-Economic-Political-World)<sup>2</sup> (\$1)*. On the quality side it may involve anything from the best social contribution that self-seeking is capable of rendering down to the basest exploitation and brutality. Logan Pearsall Smith has said that he never meets "a rich, successful business American without some slight speculation about the bones he has crushed and the wretches he has eaten." <sup>9</sup> Smith spoke from experience.

8. The bearing of the white man's burden, the be-

nevolent protection of a big brother, the spreading of civilization through the "noble calling" of commerce and the "magic" influence of trade, is now revealed as having been a process of systematic enslavement and demoralization, wherein exploiter as well as exploited has suffered degradation. Professor Arthur E. Holt's comments on "the projecting end of empire" will serve as well as any other to indicate our re-evaluation of this once splendid thing:

The formula for exploitation of the native and natural resources [of backward regions] by Western nations and capitalists is practically the same in all cases. . . . The formula for the possession of Africa includes the following items in all cases: The native in the desired territory is baited until he fights back. Then the machine gun, which Professor Eric Walker calls "the great persuader," is brought into play and the territory is taken over by right of conquest. When peace has been established, the native is shelled out of his woods by the head tax, which he must pay in money. There is only one place for him to get money, and that is working in a European or American owned mine or plantation. The mine and plantation owners meet and decide what they will pay for native labor. As the president of the Mine-Owners Association at Johannesburg, an American, said to me, "We buy our labor in a noncompetitive market." The government makes it a criminal offense for the native to strike. In South Africa, although there are six natives to one white man, the white man has taken five-sixths of the land. From out of the woods the native comes to become a peon on a white man's estate or the most helpless of laborers in a white man's mine.<sup>10</sup>

What was it Lewis Mumford said about a "new barbarism"?



Before dropping this subject we should mention the murderous struggles that arise among the civilizers over the question who shall have the right to civilize whom. As an old German junker remarked after the Great War: "Two of my boys lie buried on the battlefield of a war fought to decide whether British or German cotton spinners would sell loin cloths to the Hereros and Senegambians."

9. Our nationalism, the crowning phenomenon of the modern epoch, has become the great millstone about our necks. The nation-state has taken over the functions of the medieval church, though with a vengeful difference of outlook. Whereas the church pointed, in theory at least, toward God, the state points only toward itself. It is God. In the state modern men have sought the center and source of their lives, the ultimate and absolute point of reference, the abiding reality in which the passing generations have their spiritual dwelling place. Here the lonely and isolated individual finds his greatest shared meaning. The man depressed by a vague sense of boredom, emptiness and ineffectiveness can be fortified through identifying his life with the national glory. The success, suspecting dimly that his achievement might not after all amount to much in the vast scheme of things, can find his doubts allayed by reflecting that he has contributed to the strength of his country. Living, working and dying for the fatherland, even though one becomes just another unknown soldier, gives to one's life a larger life, bestows an immortality. As Rupert Brooke expressed it:

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;



A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware . . .  
A body of England's breathing English air. . .<sup>11</sup>

But this phenomenon has become a bitter thing. When young Rupert Brooke, along with ten million other men, lost his life in the Great War, just what was the meaning of that libation of blood? It is a question that will hardly bear thinking about. He thought he was making some corner of a foreign field forever England. Well, if he was, what of it? But he wasn't. England, like all other empires, will not be "forever." Brooke was, however, making some foreign fields England's for a limited period of time: he helped make some of Mesopotamia's oil England's — or at least the property of Royal Dutch Shell; he helped make certain African markets for loin cloths, gin and tin whistles England's — or at least the preserves of some of England's traders; he helped put down, for a generation, England's chief rival in maritime commerce and imperialistic diplomacy; he helped replace Kaiser Wilhelm II with Adolf Hitler, and to raise Italy from a second-rate power to a first-class menace. Believing that he was helping to storm the last formidable barricade in the path of human advance, Brooke was participating in the beginning of the Great Disintegration.

#### IV

In other words, that complex of social forms, ideas, impulses and tendencies which appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a providential harmony working together for good, is now revealed as a welter of fragments and fractions in which the health and wholeness of the common life is neglected, frustrated and destroyed. The modern arrangement has lost its

ability to support the race, and our secular folklore has lost the illusion of spiritual truth. It is no longer possible to conceive the particles of our piecemeal life as fused into a harmonious march of progress by transcendental laws: by some striking change in the world's chemistry, these particles now stand out as discrete particles in a piecemeal life. With business for the sake of private profit, with politics for the sake of holding office, with religion limited rigidly to a few soothing ceremonials, who or what is to institute and promote those all-inclusive social policies according to which our collective existence suffers or prospers? With a compartment of education and a compartment of science, what shall determine the aim of our education and what shall guarantee a fruitful use of our knowledge and techniques? With the earth cut up into a congeries of competing almighty states, how are we to achieve the cooperation (or at least the absence of friction) necessary for the maintenance of our interconnected civilization? Where are we to find the value, the standard, the point of reference, the authority that is sufficiently supreme to serve as a polestar? Where is that concept of the whole to be found, in the light of which we can integrate our fractional activities, and direct our energies and purposes toward one overarching, life-furthering purpose?

John Dewey, in *A Common Faith*, writes these sentences:

The community of causes and consequences in which we, together with those not born, are enmeshed is the widest and deepest symbol of the mysterious totality of being the imagination calls the universe. . . . It is the matrix within which our ideal aspirations are born and bred. It is the source of the values that the moral imagination projects as directive criteria and as shaping purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Righto, Dr. Dewey. But — Lord help us! — our life is so divided into segments that we do not, and cannot, recognize the reality of any such "totality of being." Ever since the Christian concept of God faded into "an oblong blur" we have had no adequate concept or symbol of that "community of causes and consequences in which we, together with those not born, are enmeshed." Man, for a good many years now, has lived not in a universe but in a multiverse. The bonds that hold creation together have been dissolved.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hudson, *The Story of the Renaissance*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>2</sup> Carlton J. H. Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism* (The Macmillan Co., 1926).

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Murray, *Liberalism and Civilization* (The Macmillan Co., 1938), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Summerfield Baldwin, *The Organization of Medieval Christianity* (Henry Holt & Co., 1929), p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart P. Sherman, *Critical Woodcuts* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), chapter on Sherwood Anderson.

<sup>6</sup> Erwin R. Goodenough, *Religious Tradition and Myth* (Yale University Press, 1937), pp. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Aldous Huxley in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, July 17, 1937, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Thurman W. Arnold's *The Folklore of Capitalism* (Yale University Press, 1937) presents a fine analysis of the reasons why we are unable to recognize this clearly. See particularly pp. 185-310.

<sup>9</sup> Logan Pearsall Smith in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Jan. 1938, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur E. Holt, "The Projecting End of Empire," *Christian Century*, Jan. 5, 1938, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> From "The Soldier," *Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1915), p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (Yale University Press, 1934), p. 85.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### Fascism: The Crowning Act of Defiance

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WE KNOW that the prodigal son was stubborn, but we know it only by implication. What artifices he resorted to, what crimes he committed, what desperate acts of self-assertion, what defiance he threw in the face of his encroaching fate before his will was humbled and his heart softened, we are not told. Only a sage who has seen deeply into the inner life of man would know, and only a great artist armed with the sage's knowledge could tell us. Maybe Thomas Mann knows and could tell us. But what a prodigal son society (or culture, or epoch) does when its sins encircle it is a more open and exterior matter. Since a society has resources not possessed by an individual, it can stay the hand of impending judgment for a longer period of time; it can resort to shrewder and grander artifices; it can be demonic in its self-assertion; it is capable of the defiance of an archangel.

What a once proud and self-willed society does when it has wasted its substance and is reduced to living on the husks of its own folly is more or less obvious. Its fury becomes Jovian; it discards everything which qualifies its will; it defies man and God, and ordains itself the very God of gods, asserting absoluteness, omnipotence and invincibility. Where an individual can be only pathetic, a society can achieve monstrosity.

This crowning act of defiance may take different forms

under different circumstances. Under modern conditions its typical form is fascism.

## II

We didn't take fascism very seriously the first time we heard of it. We were preoccupied with bolshevism then, and we didn't recognize fascism for what it was. We thought it was the device of an up-and-coming Italian politician, one Benito Mussolini, who seemed to be a sort of Horace Greeley, Marcus Hanna and Theodore Roosevelt rolled into one person. Fascism was an Italian Bull Moose movement that got into power. But it stayed in power; it continually tightened its grip; it liquidated its rivals. It was opportunistic, pragmatic and demagogic; yet it gave evidence of possessing a strange inner consistency; it took on a more definite shape; and it revealed a purpose that we were not in the habit of associating with political parties. Its slogans developed into a philosophy. Its rule implied a culture. It seriously intended to reconstruct the entire life of the nation. Among political movements it was a distinct and distinctive phenomenon. Still, it was an Italian phenomenon — until Adolf Hitler headed a similar movement in Germany.

When nazism seized power in Germany, and fascist movements began to sprout in a dozen other countries, we began to appreciate its pandemic significance; but the commonly accepted Marxian interpretation of its character was, it is now manifest, oversimple and inadequate. Fascism, we thought, was a ruse to save the capitalistic system in a period of severe contraction — by police clubs and castor oil on the one hand, and by racialistic mysticism on the other. We noted that it recruited the overwhelming majority of its followers from below



the middle of the middle class, and that the industrial barons quietly subsidized it. We thought we knew what this meant: the fascist movement, once in power, would be kept within "reasonable" bounds; its revolutionary spirit would be maneuvered into supporting a counter-revolutionary program. The masses would get a few crumbs and some rich slogans; there would be a few reforms but no fundamental changes; the profit system and the class system would be maintained by violence. Wasn't fascism openly antilabor? Wasn't its frenzied opposition to communism confession enough? Wasn't its first political deed always the breaking of the backs of the trade unions? Fascism was a cynical and passing clever piece of political engineering whereby the threatened economic masters channeled social unrest into their service.

This diagnosis was true enough to make it plausible, but not true enough to grasp the full import of fascism. All along the line it left pertinent facts out of account. It ignored certain factors in the rise of fascism; it did not admit more than half the economic consequences of fascism; and it failed to appreciate that fascism has (or develops) a logic and a dynamic of its own.

In the first place, it is not alone economic unrest which favors the rise of fascism, but also a sense of spiritual disillusionment, a loss of faith, an experience of emptiness, an awareness that the reason for living is called in question, a consciousness of moral decay and of social incompetence. A study<sup>1</sup> made by Dr. Theodore Abel of Columbia University shows that the average nazi recruit, when Hitler's party was growing from a membership of seven to several hundred thousand, had regular employment and was not hungry. His depression was spiritual. His country had been defeated and was sad-

*W. J. Connors*  
*1940*  
*Spencer*

dled with humiliation; its rulers fumbled when something bold and precise needed to be done; the spirit had gone out of things. There was nothing for him to have complete confidence in, nothing to be wholeheartedly loyal to, nothing to organize his living around. Everything was tentative and relative.

For another thing, fascism finally surprised the capitalist quite as much as it did the worker who woke up one morning to realize that he had helped form a company union — one from which it was high treason to withdraw. Fascism lived up to the Marxian accusations, all right: it liquidated the incorrigible radicals; it destroyed the trade unions, made strikes a major crime, placed the proletariat in a stratification from which there could be no emerging; in lieu of a rise in wages, it gave the worker the privilege of working for the fatherland rather than for himself, and the fatherland needed longer hours of work without overtime pay, and a more obeisant attitude ("Fascism," declared Mussolini, "affirms the immutable, beneficial and fruitful inequality of mankind; it denies the validity of the equation, 'Well-being equals happiness,' which would reduce men to the level of animals, caring only to be fat and well fed"); it discarded the concepts of social justice, liberty and equality, and applied these terms only to foreign affairs; it kept the system of private profit.

But fascism has far exceeded these expectations. It has kept the profit system, but removed most of the profit — except for a favored few, it has removed all the profit. It tells business what it can and cannot do; its taxes are staggering; there is no end to the "voluntary" contributions it has required; and there has been an inexhaustible stream of low interest bearing government bonds which have had to be bought. In Germany, where there

has been an apparent need for creating substitute materials industries, the middle class has been practically expropriated and the larger capitalists have been converted into milch cows for the nazi state. For instance, the capitalists are compelled to subsidize these substitute industries out of their profits (which amounts to financing your competitor), yet it is the government that owns the *Ersatz* factories, and if they make any profit it belongs to the government. Another example of the nazi milking machine was the feverish fortification work of the summer and fall of 1938: the workers for this project were conscripted, while their wages were paid by their former employers. The German capitalists have suffered more than the Italian, and it remains to be seen to what degree the Japanese are going to be reduced; but business men in all fascist countries have been given such headaches as they never had before.

Fascism is correctly described as counter-revolutionary, at least from the workers' standpoint. It is certainly not socialism in any accepted meaning of that word. But neither is it capitalism, not even by subterfuge. As Peter F. Drucker<sup>2</sup> has said (he was speaking with particular reference to Germany, but I think his statement may be generalized), the sole beneficiary of solidaritarian social and economic policies is the fascist state, its military machine and party bureaucracy. In other words, fascism is something in itself. It is not a mere tail to the capitalistic kite. The fact that it conspicuously fails to solve the economic problem, yet continues to be a success, should indicate that purely economic categories do not grasp it. Only when we see this can we begin to appreciate its significance.

Fascism is not the shallow mumbo-jumbo its detractors would have us think. It is really profound. Musso-

lini has called it a "religious conception," and that is no joke. The assertion of its claim to educate youth for itself, the subordination of all organizations and bodies to its service, the fascist symbols and trappings which now adorn the mass in rebel Spain, the fascist altar backed with a bundle of five spears — all go to substantiate this statement. The declaration of José Pemartín, national chief of university and secondary education in the Franco government, that "Spanish fascism will be the religion of religion," is no idle boast. Now that Franco has been pushed into victory by Mussolini, Hitler, Chamberlain and Bonnet, this prophecy will be fulfilled, and within two years Señor Pemartín will have good reason to write of Spanish fascism as "the religion of Spain's religion."

Fascism can be adequately apprehended only in spiritual terms. It is a religion. It involves a radical choice among values, and it is essentially a solution to a spiritual problem. I think it is a false choice and a devilish solution, but this does not prevent me from recognizing its religious nature.

### III

The general spiritual outcome of modern culture makes the field fertile for the fascist crop. I made an awkward attempt to describe that outcome in the preceding chapter. T. S. Eliot stated it deftly in poetic imagery in *The Waste Land* —

. . . where the dead tree gives no shelter,  
The cricket no relief, and the dry stone  
No sound of water.

Professor Goodenough has described it beautifully in personal terms from the standpoint of the intellectual.



Says he: We have gone in so strongly for specialization that we have come to babble strange tongues to each other. Our thought and activities have become confined to such narrow compartments that we are like the six blind men viewing the elephant. "At no time in the past has an intelligent individual so keenly felt the utter inadequacy of his own knowledge for understanding any appreciable part of himself or his surroundings, or for facing life as a whole. Coordinated knowledge seems forever gone." We have none of the necessary "generalizations" to replace those of our fathers. In times "between bursts of activity" we "stop and become aware of our utter lack of direction." It is a world where the polestar is just like any other star, and where all the stars are lightning bugs. We are "unable to suggest a universal meaning for life, or to define an objective which is of ultimate importance."<sup>3</sup>

Now an individual intellectual, especially if he draws a good salary, can manage to get by on these spiritual husks — although he won't be inclined to rear many children, and his living can't have much bounce in it. But a whole society cannot survive on such a fibrous diet, and when an appreciable number of its members become conscious of such a plight they are going to do something drastic about it. Fascism then becomes a great temptation to them, for it offers a ready and appealing solution to their problem.

It supplies that needed generalization, that certainty, direction and standard of absolute value. Abolishing the independent specializations and discrete departments of society, it welds business, politics, education, work, recreation, art, religion and family life into one national- (or "racial") patriotic-moral-mystical identity. It coordinates, incorporates, organizes the means



and materials of life into the service of a "life movement," a "sublime end." It sets up a hierarchy, spiritual as well as political, with the messiah-dictator at the top, who symbolizes the God-state. It ordains an objective of "ultimate" importance, establishes a "universal" meaning for living.

Fascism, like the inquisition of the Middle Ages, does more honor (in its own diseased way) to the nature of man and is more aware of the essential character of human life than those popular modern philosophies compounded of scientific agnosticism, capitalistic individualism, materialistic "successism" and the gospel of infinite evolutionary progress. Although it has a satanic spirituality, it nevertheless recognizes that human life is primarily and essentially spiritual: that the fundamental thing about it, the really substantial texture of it, is its meaning; that the paramount thing in a man's life is the moral-spiritual decision as to what he shall believe, dare, commit himself to.

Truly, fascism's values are wrong, and none but the hypnotized can regard it as a way out; the sane man must regard it rather as a way in to more disaster. For its absolute is really relative, its ultimate far from ultimacy, and its universal an egregious particular. Fascism involves a raising of nationalism to the *n*th power, a denial of the universal community of mankind, a resurgence of barbaric tribalism. What it produces is a larger and more stubborn fraction: a world of totalitarian states is a world of chaos in bigger and harder chunks. But remember that within the limits of the state, and so long as this absolute is able to maintain its bluff (which may be for a good many years), the spiritual and practical weaknesses of modernism are ostensibly overcome. Indeed, the weaknesses of modernism are overcome with

*Fascism. It demands*

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such seeming success that fascism fascinates such spiritual leaders as the Most Reverend Cosmo Gordon Lang, archbishop of Canterbury, and the Very Reverend William Ralph Inge, former dean of St. Paul's, who has spoken approvingly of the "patriotic exaltation and disciplined self-sacrifice" of the solidariorian hordes. The converted fascist is enabled to live, work, aim, hope, fight, procreate and die in the light of a superaim or value. This superaim or value may be — as I am certain that it is — the demon of destruction disguised as the mother of life; but the solidariorian state is a diabolical parody on something that men must have.

The irony of fascism, the fact that it is a diabolical parody on divine truth, explains the tragic power of its appeal. Fascism comes so easily and "naturally" to a prodigal son society. It asks for no great renunciation, no act of penitence, no acceptance of guilt, no rejection of what has been loved and no loving of what has been rejected, no difficult right-about-face. It transforms despair into righteous fury; it fortifies the old will; it is proud, imperious, confident, infallible, and defiant toward everything outside and beyond itself — it worships itself. It affirms that man (in the form of a particular group of men) can do it; that he *will* do it; that he will now slay his enemies, slough off every handicap, and crown himself lord of all. The discipline and sacrifices which fascism asks of its followers are those of an athlete in training for the great victory. Fascism is a tempting last resort for the modern spirit, since it staves off an admission of defeat.

When described in politico-economic terms fascism is equally appealing. It follows the line of least resistance, plays upon every major sentiment, openly attacks only what is rotten and ready to fall, promises a quick and

easy solution to a nation's more pressing problems, takes advantage of the popular fears and passions, manipulates the existing conflicts. It drums on patriotism, national pride and security, and finds a convenient scapegoat. Then it plays off opposing groups against one another, offering each a tasty tidbit, and rides them all to town. To the industrialist it promises a company union; to the worker it promises a controlled capitalist; to the middleman it promises restriction of his competitor; to the unemployed it guarantees a job; to the patriot it promises to clean out the corrupt politicians; to youth it presents a crusade of idealism; to the majority it gives the satisfaction of seeing the minority annihilated. Everybody loses his freedom, and stands a chance of being sent to a concentration camp to learn an enthusiasm for boot-licking. Regrets, if they come, come too late, for Frankenstein has been created; but perhaps regrets don't arise, for Frankenstein can be looked upon as a god instead of a monster. The losses are compensated for by the fact that everyone is given a place to fill in a consuming cause: the maintenance and augmentation of the power of the state almighty in its thrust for more power.

Fascism comes easily, one is tempted to say "naturally." It elevates an idol that modern man has already learned to revere: the nation-state. It rolls together all the little sins and perversities and defiances of modern culture into one sublime sin, one gargantuan perversity, one crowning act of defiance.

#### IV

How long this crime will stand I do not pretend to know — possibly until it is drowned in the blood of its own spilling. What might be left after that eventuality I do not pretend to know — possibly a saving remnant.

Nor do I have an opinion as to whether all peoples among whom the modern spirit has flared up and burned low will resort to this final artifice before they feel compelled to turn in the direction where true life is to be found. But one thing I think I know is this: our only hope lies in turning again to the God revealed in Christianity and in seeking earnestly to learn his truth and submit to his will.

But I see fifteen men on their feet, all bursting to speak at once. Two of these men are what might be called practicing scientists; the remaining thirteen are a varied company of believers in the clear white light of science. "Just a minute, parson," they are saying. And the message they wish to utter is that, while they sympathize with much I have said, they do not feel I am advocating a fruitful approach to the problem. I am on the wrong track: religion is intellectually a hangover from man's jungle period, and the only certain way out is by the path of science.

So I cannot proceed until I have dealt with their contention.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came to Power* (Prentice-Hall, 1938).

<sup>2</sup> See Peter F. Drucker's authoritative article in *Common Sense*, Nov. 1938.

<sup>3</sup> Goodenough, *Religious Tradition and Myth*, Introduction.



## CHAPTER NINE

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# The Superstition of Science

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THE PREJUDICES, thought habits and presuppositions of our culture are so heavily weighted in favor of science that it is next to impossible to get a fair hearing for religion. Religion is popularly regarded as begging the question. When one talks about it these days he can take nothing for granted. But when one talks about science he can assume that his hearers have, or think they have, a general knowledge and appreciation of what science is; that they accept in good faith the premises on which it stands, and have no doubts about its validity and usefulness. Indeed, one may assume a general reverence toward science something like that of former ages toward the Holy Grail. Religion presumably belongs to the twilight period of man's mental development; science places us in the clear light of day. "If there is any one prediction that can be safely ventured upon, it is that we shall increasingly be obliged to turn to the scientist and his way of thinking." This statement, uttered by no prophet but written casually by a practitioner of higher journalism in a recent magazine article, expresses what has been for a period of years a folk attitude, and is taken as involving no more question than the statement that the temperature in Greenland will be low next January.

What is science? As is the case with vital faiths, very few people ever stop to define it. Rather do they invoke



it, appeal to it, apostrophize it. It is a "spirit" or an "attitude." When pressing for a definition we are often told that it is simply organized knowledge. The beauty of this definition is that it lets everybody into the scientific communion who wants to be counted a member. It even admits Thomas Aquinas who, in the thirteenth century, organized knowledge (or what was regarded as knowledge) as knowledge was never organized before or since.

What is science? It is a method of knowledge that arose and first proved its usefulness in the realm of mechanics, physics and chemistry. In essence it is remarkably simple. You *experiment* until you have hit upon a law of relationship, or a principle of behavior, which accounts for the facts under consideration. But you do not leave any doubt as to the validity of your discovery. You test it by repeated experiments until you have made a *practical demonstration* of its truth, or else demonstrated that the truth with regard to that particular matter is still unknown.

This idea may sound trivial, but its emergence in the world produced a social-spiritual earthquake. It completely upset the traditional method of arriving at truth, and placed in the hands of man a new power that made him giddy. Before the enunciation of the scientific method, knowledge was gained by deduction from other knowledge, or from General Principles which were very sacred. The method was logic, not experiment; and the proof was also by logic, not by practical demonstration. For example, the question whether the other side of the globe was inhabited (a lively topic of speculation in the fifteenth century) was settled by the Spanish theologian, Tostatus, as follows: "The apostles were commanded to go into the whole world and preach the gospel to

What  
is  
science

every creature; they did not go to any such people as the antipodes; therefore, there are no such people as the antipodes."

## II

The scientific method gave such a signal account of itself that it was not long in becoming a new necromancy. It worked. It continually added improved techniques to the endeavors of the world. One might oppose it in the name of all that was holy; but a comparison of the seamanship of Columbus with the syllogisms of Tostatus could lead to but one conclusion: science had the stuff. It gave man a new power to manipulate, to control.

Before the dawn of science there had been no precise understanding of what knowledge is. It was confused with emotional attitudes, commingled with poetry, not distinct from imagination or fancy. Man had been seeking adjustment rather than control. He didn't know that knowledge is power. So he didn't know what knowledge is.

Almost at the same time that Galileo was showing the accepted physics to have been written as Homer wrote the *Iliad*, John von Linschoten (in 1598) was telling Europeans that the bird of paradise skins (then called birds of the sun) which Portuguese traders were bringing back from the East Indies came from a bird that had neither feet nor wings; that lived its entire life in the air, always moving toward the sun, and never touching the earth till it died; that no man had ever seen this aerial creature alive. Such questions as how these creatures remained in the air and moved toward the sun without flying, how they reproduced and reared their young, did not trouble Linschoten and his contemporaries in the least. Here was simply another marvelous

phenomenon in a world where all sorts of inexplicable and unpredictable things might happen — where a beast might talk like a man, an old woman might transmogrify herself into a mouse, an elephant might float like a soap bubble, the sky might split at any time and emit a miracle. Romance and natural history were the same.

Or take the attitude toward the use of Peruvian bark (cinchona) which, by accident, had been found effective in treating malarial fever. Europeans in the sixteenth century opposed this remedy passionately on the grounds that it did not “evacuate the morbid matter,” that it “bred obstructions in the viscera,” that it “only bound up the spirits and stopped the paroxysms for a time, favoring the translation of the peccant matter into more noble parts” — in other words, took the disease out of the liver and put it into the soul.

Not until science had established the concept of patterns of natural causation, and had learned the principle of analyzing and isolating the concrete items in a given situation, did such metaphysical nonsense cease to blanket the physico-chemical machinery of the material world. The scientific method freed man from immemorial limitations. It gave him a sharp, hard tool for cutting into the rock-faced situations of his world where he had formerly banged with his fists and mumbled incantations. It transformed him from a suppliant into a god.

How natural it was for man to be unscientific toward science, to jump to the boldest conclusions about it, to spell it with a capital S, to look toward it as the true means of grace, to indulge in glowing generalizations about it and fail to inquire whether it had any inherent limitations!

The competence of science was obvious — railway

locomotives, steamships, textile mills, telephones, anaesthetics, microscopes, incandescent lamps; then automobiles, airplanes, radios, synthetic materials. "What won't they discover next!" became not a question but an expression of awe on every man's lips — "they" being the wizards of the new necromancy. The gospel of science seeped down among the multitude along with the gadgets and accomplishments that poured from her magic cornucopia. It became the blind faith of the common man, the undertone of modern education.

In such an atmosphere the claim of *omniscience* for science did not appear as a claim, but as an obvious fact. Compare the method of Darwin with that of Linschoten; compare the physician with the medicine man! Furthermore, note that wherever ancestral attitudes and modes of thought had been abandoned, that wherever man had put aside theology and metaphysics, and had substituted the scientific method, marked progress had resulted. Auguste Comte saw the point and amplified it in his positivism. Thomas Huxley saw it and declared his confidence that the scientific method yielded the only real knowledge, and that it was destined to be applied to "all departments of human thought." Men of religion saw it too, and, like the Reverend John Haynes Holmes, called for the replacement of theology by sociology.

Was it not plain common sense that any "reality" which could not be vouched for and handled by science was not primary, or important, or even real! When Huxley ran into the phenomenon of consciousness and found that it slipped through his net like air, he declared, like a Japanese diplomat, that the thing was no phenomenon but an *epiphenomenon* — a sort of superfluous mist



or glow that rose above the ferment of biological chemistry.

True, these self-conscious thinkers, these men of drastic mind and extraordinary intellectual integrity, were indicators of the direction of the cultural wind rather than spokesmen for the public mind. But the wind was blowing a gale in their direction. Without thinking out all the implications, the public came to feel that "we shall increasingly be obliged to turn to the scientist and his way of thinking."

### III

From time to time it has become painfully clear that, despite the presence of science and its power to rule the waves, the modern world is threatened with disintegration to an almost unprecedented degree. In these dark hours the apostles of the sufficiency of science have come forward to warn us that what we need is more science, and that right quickly.

Gazing on the wreck and ruin of the World War, James Harvey Robinson, taking up the message of H. G. Wells, came forth in *The Mind in the Making*<sup>1</sup> with the thought that our trouble lay in our failure to apply science to ourselves and our social concerns. We have learned, Dr. Robinson pointed out, how to be open-minded, critical, dispassionate and humble with regard to rocks, plants, machines and chemical elements. And this has gotten us places. But outside the field of mechanics and natural science our minds are still bewitched with a host of pre-scientific assumptions and superstitions. Contrast the attitude of a garage mechanic toward an ailing automobile engine with the attitude of our statesmen and business leaders toward an ailing so-



ciety. There's the hint of our difficulties. For fifteen years this has been repeated by one-fourth of the Protestant clergy, by one-half of our newspaper editors, by three-fourths of our journalists, and by all our college professors.

Bertrand Russell has frequently delivered himself of the same faith and lament. In 1928 (in *Sceptical Essays*) he put it in the form of three propositions:

(1) When experts are agreed, the opposite opinion cannot be held to be certain; (2) when they are not agreed, no opinion can be regarded as certain by a nonexpert; and (3) when they all hold that no sufficient grounds for a positive opinion exist, the ordinary man would do well to suspend his judgment.<sup>2</sup>

These propositions, if accepted, said Mr. Russell, "would absolutely revolutionize human life" — of course, revolutionize it for the better. I don't think Russell ever expects actually to see a world of such suspended judgment — it would be a world suspiciously congenial to the experts and too uncongenial to the rest of us. But anyhow he has pointed the way out — or thinks he has.

Stuart Chase has recently gone over to the camp of the scientific salvationists and started pounding the pulpit in behalf of a science of language ("semantics"). Whereas Mr. Russell advocated the establishment of an oligarchy of experts before whom the masses would prostrate their opinionators until given the word to rise, Mr. Chase stands for letting us say anything we please so long as we are perfectly definite and comprehensible about it. Chase tells us that he woke up one morning to realize that as a pamphleteering reformer he wasn't getting anywhere, because his message was not coming through his

words. What he meant was not what ninety-eight per cent of his readers thought he meant; and he perceived that the whole muttering world is laboring under a similar handicap: it is filled with a sound and fury signifying nothing.

The trouble is that the users of words and the hearers of words seldom know exactly what those words refer to. Our language is filled with windy abstractions and primitive personifications which either do not refer to anything tangibly existent in the actual world, or else may be interpreted as referring to a variety of things. The result is a sad failure in mental communication, and the remedy is semantics.

If you think semantics wouldn't be a great boon to the human race, listen. Take the European situation (I'll risk your guess as to what "the European situation" refers to). It's too late to do anything about it now, Mr. Chase admits: the blazing war of gusty ideologies is too far advanced. But "if the knowledge of semantics were general, and men were on guard for communication failure, the conflagration (which is impending) could hardly start." Or take the domestic situation. The "gross animism" with which we have endowed the modern business corporation "has permitted a relatively small number of individuals to throw the economic mechanism seriously out of gear."<sup>3</sup> If people were armed with semantic understanding, such atrocities couldn't occur. The only conclusion a moral man can draw from Mr. Chase's doctrine is that everybody ought to be locked in a bull pen and shot full of semantics.

While no very considerable number of people may accept the particular prescription advocated by any one spokesman for science, or agree as to which department of science has the lump wherewith to leaven the whole,

most right-thinking people in our section of the globe have a religious faith (though it is appreciably weaker than twenty years ago) in science as a generality. There are differences of opinion as to how much science is going to do for us; but whatever hope there is for the redemption of the world is believed dimly by millions of people to lie in the further development and application of science.

## IV

I must confess, gentlemen, that I do not share this faith. I freely admit that the scientific method is valid; that it has made a difference in the life of mankind; that it is here to stay and will occupy a not unimportant place in the civilization of the future — provided we do not destroy our civilization with the tools of science. I fully recognize that the entrance of science into the world gave men new opportunities to enrich their collective life. But I do not see that science has helped us to make a fruitful use of those opportunities, and I do not see how it can play the major role in helping us. Science has enabled us to have a staggering list of amazingly efficient techniques. These may be, and have been, used for evil as well as for good; and whether they appear on the asset or the liability side of the balance sheet depends upon factors that are outside the competence of science. Therefore I cannot look to the “scientist and his way of thinking” for the means of our grace.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that the essence of science is experiment and practical demonstration. Therein lies the secret of its power and also of its limitations. For experiment and demonstration can be enacted only within a certain province — the province of the inorganic or mechanical. When the scientific

process is applied to the organic (as it may be with limited success, since there are mechanical features to the organic) it is forced to assume that, and proceed as if, the living is dead.

The scientific method is wholly appropriate under a combination of four conditions. (1) The phenomenon dealt with must be isolated, and therefore must be capable of isolation without essentially altering its nature. (2) The data must be measurable quantities. (3) There must be an absolute objectivity with regard to the data being studied. And (4) there must be such complete control over the situation that it can be duplicated for the purpose of making tests. It is plain that these conditions can be met in the case of inorganic substances. Such substances can be isolated without fundamentally changing their nature, are subject to measurement and can be treated dispassionately, and the situation can be controlled and duplicated. But the moment you pass into the realm of living things you encounter obstacles which become more and more insurmountable as you attempt to deal with higher and higher levels.

To what extent can a section of life be isolated from its organism without becoming essentially modified? Biology is continually getting mired down in that problem. It has made some useful discoveries of a positive nature, and has destroyed a great many folk beliefs. It will undoubtedly achieve more in the future. But few biologists entertain the sanguine expectations of fifty years ago, according to which biology was going to subdue the ultimate organic mystery.

Perhaps the most obvious and vivid problem of isolation is met in the field of social psychology, where one necessary task is that of isolating the individual from society and the "instinctive" from the "acquired." This



problem has proved itself insuperable. A person segregated from society — really segregated — ceases to be everything, or never becomes anything, that constitutes a *person*. About the only thing the psychologists have been able to isolate, measure and deal with in a genuinely scientific way is reflex action and nerve impulse (a matter of mechanics). This has been of some value; but the effort to build a science of human behavior out of it (page Dr. John B. Watson) surpassed absurdity.

Measurement, in any scientific sense, and objectivity, to a considerable degree, are ruled out in situations where value is involved. We need no better reminder of this than the opinions expressed by men of science when they make forays into questions of human conduct and social affairs. Here they are just as naive as anyone else, more pontifical than a preacher, less imaginative than a politician, and more apt to contradict themselves than a man of letters. The American Medical Association has a social outlook similar to that of the National Association of Manufacturers and the late, but not lamented, Liberty League. Physicists, chemists, inventors and mathematicians reveal that their minds work on moral and political problems in about the same manner as does the mind of a cautious postal clerk, a shrewd Irish washerwoman or a semi-enlightened industrialist. There are few living thinkers who have given me more pleasure than Bertrand Russell. He is a great mathematician (which leaves me cold) and a first-rate wit, and ever since the World War shook down his ivory tower he has loved to "turn the crank of an opinion mill." And to good purpose, I think. But in many of his forays into matters beyond the scope of science he has held contrary opinions when experts were agreed, has been certain when they disagreed, and has not held his



judgment in abeyance when they have maintained that no sufficient grounds for a positive opinion exist.

The fourth requirement of the scientific method — the maintenance of a constant situation and the duplication of situations for the purpose of making tests — cannot be met at all in the case of human beings. It is questionable whether this requirement can be met perfectly when dealing with any living thing, because life is spontaneous and has a movement of its own which tends to make the situation this afternoon different from what it was this morning.

## V

It is necessary to be cantankerously strict about what "science" and "scientific" mean, because the words have become shibboleths. Just as every political faction in this country rushes to the flagpole with its slogan and tries to run it aloft as pristine Americanism, so is there a propulsion to make the claim of "scientific." Practically every field of study these days is a "science." Whenever two or three band themselves together, strike a critical attitude, stake out a province, collect facts, throw a hypothesis over them, and set up some standards for thinking about the problems involved, a science is said to exist. Thus we have those strident pretenders, the "social sciences." Well, if the social sciences are sciences, so is ethics a science; for ethicists too make inquiries, use criticism, collect facts, set up tests. The writer of the first epistle of John must have been a scientist, for he said: "Do not believe every spirit, beloved, but test the spirits to see if they come from God." The rude truth is that the social sciences are not sciences, and have not the slightest prospect of ever becoming such. They are social *studies*. Almost none of the phenomena with

which they deal can be subjected to the scientific method without violating reality. Psychology is as much a divination as it is a science; history is very much like art; sociology is an attempt to construct a critical mythology; and economics is chiefly a political weapon, although for the time being its blade is as rubber.

The "hypotheses" which the social studies frame do not correspond to the hypotheses of true science, because they cannot be submitted to genuine scientific testing. Rather do they correspond to the imaginative configurations of experience devised by art, philosophy and religion. History, for example, can be called art-in-a-different-medium. So far as the truth obtained, and the method of obtaining it, are concerned, one is neither more nor less scientific than the other. The historian may employ science with regard to some of his basic materials, and so may the artist. But historians (when they are really historians, and not just publishers of the contents of their filing cabinets) take what they consider to be the salient facts of a particular subject and arrange them into a meaningful pattern. In precisely the same way as artists, they will differ individually and from age to age at three points: (1) in the facts which they see; (2) in their judgment of the relative importance of the facts; and (3) in their interpretative arrangements. History is a spiritual-political tool. Within its limits it paints a picture of the world, or of a section of the world, in terms of value. In the writing of history the men of the present re-create the past in such a way that it will encourage, warn, inspire, teach or inform them; and the same period of the past will, naturally, be re-created differently in every different period. This is too manifest to require illustration.

These comments should not be mistaken for castiga-

tion of any sort. The removal of the scientific label from the social studies does not deprive them of a useful and dignified place in the sun. Indeed, the fact that they partake of the nature of art and mythology is another way of saying that they contain values and supply needs where science would be barren. They are really limited imitations of religion without admitting it. All that any one of the social studies would have to do in order to become a full-fledged religion would be to lose its inhibitions and its awe of departmental boundaries, and proclaim that its field, its methods and its findings are sufficiently important to define the values about which life shall be organized. These impulses and presumptions are implicit in all of the social studies, and during the 1920's they threatened to become explicit in psychology.

Nor should what I have said about the social studies be understood as granting sovereignty to anarchic subjectivism, or as calling for the abandonment of critical thought. There is no inherent reason why art or philosophy should be any more anarchic than science, since there are principles to be obeyed and standards to be honored in all cases.

## VI

The thing which limits the role of science in human destiny is the fact that it necessarily treats all its subjects as mechanisms, and must assume that the quality (or value) aspects of reality are without primary significance. It is true that living things have important mechanical characteristics, and to that extent science is applicable. The clock-maker's conception of reality has borne some good fruit (and some bad, too) outside the realm of clocks. But the most significant thing about

life is its organic and spiritual nature. The scientific assumption that the organic is inorganic is quite as clumsy as the old animistic assumption that all objects house spirits. (Possibly the former has made us blind in more vital places than the latter.)

The ineptness of science before the totality of life is graphically illustrated by its ineptness before a piece of protoplasm. It can take a particle of this living substance, treat it as if it were analogous to a clock, take it to pieces, and tell us the chemical composition. From the mechanical standpoint the job is thorough, the analysis perfect. But the job is not quite complete, for the scientist cannot put the pieces back together again so they will tick as protoplasm. Nor is the analysis actually perfect, for the scientist's first analytical deed (the breaking up of the substance) results in the death of the protoplasm, so that what is really studied is not protoplasm at all but its corpse. To my unsophisticated mind this shortcoming seems a major one; and I consider the wholehearted trust of our age in such a crippled device as bordering upon tragedy.

The principles of science are non-life principles. Despite many florid claims to the contrary, science cannot perform a truly creative function. Up to a certain limit it is highly useful; beyond that point it fails utterly. It can make a positive contribution only to the instruments whereby we seek to accomplish our ends; the ends we shall seek, the values about which we shall organize our living, are as alien to science as ideology to a protozoan. For example, science, quite incidentally, has given us in modern times the mechanical structure for a human community greater in scope and degree than was ever thought possible except through the miraculous intervention of God. But it has given us only the structural



skeleton; to the creation of the living organism of community it has contributed nothing whatever. It has given material cords; but the act of tying men together it is wholly unable to perform.

Science is *one* method of approaching reality. It is an obviously useful method; it should not be scorned, it should never be excluded. But there are other methods and approaches which are indispensable. When science is set up as the one trustworthy and competent approach, when it is presumed to have exclusive efficacy in determining what reality is, when it is looked upon as *the* method to which all others must be subordinated, it becomes vicious.

## VII

The excessive adulation of science, the tendency to ape its attitudes and apply its tools in all places and to every facet of reality, has had a baneful effect. Blanketed over the whole range of human experience, the scientific point of view has helped to rob our experience of its primary significance — its meaning. It has helped to weaken, if not destroy, our sense of the metaphysical, religious dimension. It has tended to reduce all reality to a horizontal level of quantity and mechanics where quality and meaning exist as a sort of adulteration or as a curious but unfortunate obstruction to clear thinking and precise action — a plane where some things may be expedient and others inexpedient, but where nothing is recognized as having a perpendicular dimension, reaching up into heaven or down into hell, making for salvation or damnation. It has encouraged us to ignore the nature of man as a being with spiritual responsibility, who must make moral decisions which nourish his life with strength and meaning or plunge it into the bleak-



ness of darkness and nothingness. Although science did not create the stupid moral-spiritual escapism of agnosticism, it has served as a great justifier of this attitude.

"Was ever an insect flying between two flowers," asked Edwin Arlington Robinson in "Cavender's House," "told less than we are told of what we are?" This question (which is a question in form, but an affirmation in spirit) expresses the skepticism and befuddlement typical of modernity in its ripened years; and, while there have always been and always will be propensities in the being of man prompting him to seek this form of escape and veiled self-destruction, it is an old sin which has been given new aid and comfort by modern science.

Men have used science to make doubt a legitimate creed, even to raise doubt to the position of a saving principle. By appealing to the sacred name of science, it is possible to maintain an agnostic position toward the most vital matters with an easy conscience, even a proud conscience; for one can congratulate himself on his refusal to be gullible and on his courage to admit his ignorance, and can carry this on into a soft form of self-pity for being so wise that he knows he does not know as much as his desire-nature would like. "We don't know what we are; we're as ignorant as an insect about the purpose and meaning of our lives — perhaps we are just a species of overdeveloped insect; we are muddled and we haven't any way of finding out." Men can say that in an "age of science" — they do say it — and assume that they are being uncommonly loyal to light and truth; for they are armed with the argument that science has thus far found these questions unanswerable, and that fact is supposed to lay the matter on the shelf.

The agnostic is perfectly right about the inability of

science to answer these questions, and perfectly wrong about everything else. Possibly he is being stubbornly loyal to science, but he is being disloyal to himself, to life and to reality. He is embracing a concealed lie and committing spiritual suicide.

The position that man knows little or nothing about the nature, purpose and significance of his life — a position encouraged by an exaggerated opinion of science, though not created by science — is a dishonest evasion of fact. For the fact is that if we do not know what we are and what our living is about (and we don't know these things as scientists) we have to assume that we know, and we do really act as if we knew. Every practical choice rests upon or involves a metaphysical faith. As scientists we are, and ought to be, agnostics and eschewers of the metaphysical, for otherwise we could not be scientific. But as men who must decide to do this or that or something else we are metaphysicians moving in a perpendicular dimension where our movements determine what we are and shall become. The lines of action that we follow, the discriminations that we make, the loyalties that we recognize, the pursuits we organize our living around — all involve assumptions that the nature of man is such-and-such, that the meaning of living is such-and-such, that the character of reality is such-and-such. The professional agnostic, the philosophic denier of the religious dimension, is simply a person who decides ultimate questions without admitting it. He is hiding himself from himself.

Why? For reasons, of course. If one's mind is in a state of metaphysical catalepsy he is not consciously worried by his spiritual situation. He does not have to look at himself as he is "amid the eternal ways." He does not have to face the philosophy which undergirds his living.

He does not have to admit that he holds himself and his life as cheaply as his values and pursuits may indicate. There are any number of reasons. One may embrace agnosticism because he wants to excuse himself from doing so many mean or foolish things. It is comforting to be able to say, "Well, I don't know what man really is or what this living business is all about, so you couldn't expect me to do any better." Again, we like to feign spiritual ignorance in order that we may act like insects.

Not only is agnosticism dishonest; it is incredibly stupid. When one says, "I don't know; nothing can be proved about this; I shall have to forego making up my mind about these weighty questions," he assumes that it doesn't make any difference, that a profession of ignorance destroys the questions, that agnosticism is the wise attitude. It is actually an attitude which guarantees self-destruction, for it destroys all possibility of ever being what you want to be and of achieving what you want to achieve. It is like sailing a ship without a chart or a goal. You say to yourself: "I don't know why I'm in this boat; I don't know what sea this is, nor what lies in any direction; some say one thing and some another, but I don't know; I doubt if this voyage has any purpose or meaning; I doubt if it is correct to speak of it in such purposeful terms as a 'voyage'; to my unprejudiced mind it's just sailing; and I guess I'll go in this direction today and in another direction tomorrow; perhaps I'll just sail round and round; or maybe I'll drift and see what happens." That's stupid; that's suicidal; that's treason to life. Men are certainly something; they want something and are trying to do something. If they don't know what they are, or what they want, or what they are trying to do; if they have no inkling of the nature or character of the situation in which they stand, then it is

impossible for them to be what they want to be or to accomplish what they want to accomplish. Indeed, it is certain that they will achieve nothing and become nothingness.

Of course, a genuine agnosticism is actually impossible. The only example of such is found in a story about the philosopher Pyrrho, reputed to have been the founder of skepticism. Pyrrho had a teacher from whom he had learned that man never knows enough to be sure that one course of action is better or wiser than another. One afternoon when he was taking a walk he saw this teacher with his head stuck in a ditch, unable to get out. After contemplating the situation for some time Pyrrho walked on, maintaining that there was no sufficient ground for thinking he would do any good by pulling the old man out. Someone else, less skeptical, effected a rescue and blamed Pyrrho for his heartlessness. But his teacher praised him for his consistency.

There are two reasons why this story is not an example of complete agnosticism. The first one is that it never happened. And the second is that when Pyrrho walked on he involuntarily made the assumption that it was better to let his teacher die. He pretended that he did not know the wise course of action; but he chose a course of action nevertheless. In other words, denying the religious dimension is like trying to evade space. We choose values, we commit ourselves, we take a moral stand, we act on faith, we move and exist in a spiritual realm in spite of all our theories.

When Edwin Arlington Robinson suggested that man knows no more about himself and his life than an insect flying between two flowers, he was not being as agnostic as may appear. He was implying that man is like an insect, and he said so explicitly in another poem, "Ben



Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford ": " Spiders and flies — we're mostly one or t'other." That's a sweeping metaphysical assumption, a bold and definite answer to an ultimate question, a doubt in the department of philosophy which is a critical affirmation in the realm of religion. Believing it involves an enormous quantity of faith and amounts to a radical spiritual decision.

## VIII

Agnosticism cannot reasonably be justified by science. Agnosticism is man taking a certain moral-spiritual position, and science cannot take a position with regard to such things. Science, it is true, is forced to ignore the metaphysical, cannot recognize the existence of the religious dimension wherein men make or unmake themselves by their choices. But this simply means that science is not omniscient, that human existence must be approached from viewpoints and with methods other than those of science. Science must not be excluded; it must be supplemented and complemented.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Harper & Bros., 1921.

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1928), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Chase in *Harper's Magazine*, Nov., Dec., 1937.





## The Case for Religion

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THE DISTINCTION between what belongs to science and what does not is, of course, not as precise as my statements might seem to imply. No sharp demarcation exists. There are some areas or aspects of experience where science is inapplicable to any significant degree, others where it is partially applicable, and still others where it is wholly appropriate (the mechanical aspect of the physico-chemical world). Speaking generally, human life is a hopeless proposition from the scientific standpoint, because human life is characteristically organic, spontaneous, creative and spiritual, and because man is primarily a meaning-seeing, value-cherishing, freedom-enjoying creature. Man is compelled by the nature of things to live for spiritual ends, to organize his living around values, to shape and inspire his behavior in the light of his interpretations of meaning and according to his visions of the good. These are matters with which ethics, art, philosophy and politics deal; and in their ultimate aspect they constitute the province of religion. In the province of religion the methods and approaches of science are not only unemployable, but the methods and approaches which are necessarily employed are such as to give scientists, and especially scientific gospels, the heebie-jeebies. We had better bring this conflict out into the open.

The scientific gospels taunt religion for its fumbling

and "primitive" methods of dealing with reality; for its inability to get rid of ambiguity; for its failure to own a deft tool for detecting error and submitting proof; for its wanderings away from the concrete and tangible; for not keeping its house in order by reason of its permitting all manner of perversions of the mind and the spirit — in short, for not being scientific.

I think I have already exposed the absurdity of this taunt (although its facts must be admitted to be true). But let us listen to the rest of the scientific gospellers' sermon. They have been bitten with the bug of science and have an understandable, though naive, desire to see its precise methods universally applied. Moreover, they are oppressed by a common man's knowledge of the errors and evils of this unscientific world, and they want to do something about it. (One suspects that their gospel is derived more from their knowledge of social evil than from their knowledge of science.) "Look at the mess," they say, "which man, using unscientific methods, has made of his collective life. Science is yet too young to tell us what to do, but it at least tells us what not to do: don't act with such passionate certainty in such a state of crying-out-loud ignorance. Although science has not accumulated enough knowledge to guide positively our social course, it has given us an attitude for preventing a lot of foolish deeds, as well as a method which, if assiduously applied over a long enough period of time, will eventually take us out of the woods. While we are waiting for this method, this magic key, to do its stuff, let us be open-minded; let us suspend our judgment; let us cultivate doubt as a principle; let us be semantic. This will at least cause us to desist from many of our blunderous and murderous undertakings."

Ten, fifteen years ago, the great object lesson of this

homily was the World War. Now it is fascism — and the next world war. “It is not an accident,” writes Professor C. E. Ayres, “that every dogma has its hierarchy and every totalitarian regime its dogma”<sup>1</sup> — the implication being that “dogma” represents the devil and “the scientific state of mind” the savior. One of Stuart Chase’s object lessons is the following outburst of a nazi conjurer:

The Aryan fatherland which has nursed the souls of heroes, calls upon you for the supreme sacrifice which you, in whom flows heroic blood, will not fail, and which will echo forever down the corridors of history.<sup>2</sup>

Putting aside the question of oratorical quality, Mr. Chase’s particular criticism of this perfervid sentence is that it is a series of unscientific-unsemantic “blabs,” that “nothing comes through,” that it refers to nothing discoverable in the real (tangible) world of experience (sensory). The general criticism made by the scientific gospelers is that this type of “thinking” is to be damned because it represents the quintessence of dogmatism, mysticism, faith and mythology; that such evils as nazism could not exist except under such protective coverings. The moral is: abolish these coverings.

## II

While it is embarrassing to be caught with such a bad piece of oratory in one’s hands, it must be admitted that religion is composed of such stuff as nazism is made of; that, even like nazi oratory, it is constitutionally unsemantic, nonscientific, full of faith and given to using dogma and myth. The book of Isaiah is quite as unsemantic and mythological as *Mein Kampf*, the two being as far apart as the poles in moral quality and spiritual

outlook, but equally objectionable or at least irrelevant to science. If this type of thinking, this approach to reality, this manner of moving within the perpendicular-spiritual dimension, is not valid, then what we call religion is an outworn shell which must be left by "life's unresting sea."

*Religion*  
My contention is that the religious method and approach are unavoidable, that they are necessarily the process and procedure whereby man deals with the central matter of his life. This question might be called a problem of language, but it is probably first of all the problem of what is the central matter of man's life. I maintain, and have tried previously to show, that the "central matter" is a spiritual one. Men are essentially and primarily persons facing the tragic issue of personality's life or death, creation or destruction. They move willy-nilly in a perpendicular dimension where what they choose and do continually strengthens or undoes them. This is not a calculable or measurable region. It is one of ambiguity—a region where science can find nothing to fasten upon, and where the mind of the traveler must grope its way by means of mythological constructions, must spin ideological webs about the goods and evils of that realm, must think and speak through art and ritual and symbol and parable. However fumbling it may be, this is the only method we have for stating meaning, for apprehending value, achieving integrity and moving mentally in the region where our beings are saved and damned.

The process might oversimply be described as follows: Life necessarily has meaning, and living must be organized around or posited upon values. But since we are creatures with intellect, we act through reason and for reasons. Therefore we live and move within a world of



ideas which describe (or indicate in various ways) things as right and good and true, and vice versa. These ideas are practical instruments which further the life-purpose by supporting (rationally) life-values, or what are believed to be life-values. Their construction is an artifice required by an organism with an intellect, a reason. They are devices for adjusting to reality, for directing our energies in a fruitful direction, for helping the personality to survive and flourish. They are not, of course, reality itself, but they simply convey reality — reflect it, insinuate it, enable us to deal with it in a moral way. They are of the nature of poetry, painting, mythology, fiction. Yet they are true — when they stand the test of human experience in its broadest, deepest and highest reaches. We correctly accept them as true if and when they support the values which experience (taken totally) tells us are necessary for the furtherance of life. But they are true only in a moral-spiritual sense.

It is particularly important to understand that these truths of religion are not truths of science. They state meanings and values which science cannot recognize as real, and they involve a purpose and a method alien to science. Science cannot make head or tail out of the ideas of religion, or find any substance in them; it is compelled by its nature to distrust them; when mistaken for science they are distinctly bad science. The first chapter of Genesis, for instance, contains great religious truth; but this truth is sheer nonsense when it is taken for astronomy, geology, physics, chemistry and biology.

A simple illustration is the idea of the soul. The idea that man has "an immortal soul" or "the likeness of God" in him conveys to us many things which it is mankind's best interest to know and cherish. It tells us, among other things, that man is something above and



unique among other creatures; that he is, along with his creaturehood, a person, a spiritual being, a being dwelling in both a physical and a metaphysical world, a being destined to know such qualities as "salvation" and "damnation." It gives us reasons of the most urgent kind to be thoughtful and to seek wisdom in what we do; because what we do becomes what we are, registers in a place more significant than public opinion. It tells us that there is something inherently sacred about a man; that it is an awful thing to murder another, or to use him as a slave, or to treat him as a beast, or to rob him of the fullness of life that is in him. And so forth and so on. The idea of the soul is true in the sense that it houses values which are indispensable to life. But it is a moral-spiritual truth. Do not make the mistake of assuming that the soul is an entity like a rock or a gas which can be discovered and dealt with scientifically. As a biological theory the idea is absurd — as was demonstrated by the dean of a certain denominational college who wrote a book a few years ago purporting to prove that the soul is located in the organ of the heart.

### III

To criticize the Aryan fatherland stuff on semantic or scientific grounds is beside the point. Of course it is neither semantic nor scientific; it is religious. Mr. Chase's objection that nazi oratory and ideology, from the semantic standpoint, are a collection of "blabs," that "nothing comes through," is correct enough. But what of it? From another standpoint, something vitally important "comes through": a faith comes through. And politically, the Hitler regime gets a loyalty and obedience, acquires a significance, from and through it which could not possibly be got on a semantic basis. While it

may be theoretically true that several nations would feel easier today if the German people had steeped themselves in semantics during the last twenty years, even a scientific gospeler ought to realize that this would not have alleviated the despair of a beaten people, nor destroyed the treaty of Versailles. Mr. Chase's objections to nazism-fascism do not credit that phenomenon with being what it is, namely, a faith, a religion.

My criticism of the Aryan fatherland stuff is made on moral-spiritual grounds. It is an evil faith, a demonic religion. It glorifies limited values as being of absolute and universal worth. It calls a strutting little Caesar "God." As Ivan Karamazov's devil predicted, it brings forth the man-god. It affirms the life of a racial-national group, but denies the life of the larger human community. Its weapon is the sword. The impulses it releases are those of fear and hate. It is an exaltation of brute power, an assertion that nothing else has reality. It conceives the universe as a vortex of ruthless energy where the generous, the merciful, the pacific-minded, the humble and pure in heart are sucked into ignoble extinction, and where the biggest and fiercest wolf survives as the final and consummate meaning. Moloch is creator, lord and judge.

I believe this is a moral-spiritual lie. I believe fascism's life-values are really death-values. I do not believe the fascist religion directs human energy in a fruitful direction, or helps humanity to survive and flourish. I do not believe that fear gives birth to creative actions, or that the sword is a builder of anything which lasts. I believe that in the long run nothing fails like brutality, hate and the will to power. I read history as being littered with pronouncements of doom upon these things. I believe that the universe is constructed so as to support

men when they respect personality and practice mutuality, cooperation and community in a universal sense; and to destroy men when they respect and practice the opposite.

What remedy would I propose? The abolition of religion, a declaration of the sovereignty of science? No. That could only play into the hands of the enemy, for a religion of some sort is unavoidable. The remedy lies in another religion, a "truer" religion — specifically, Judeo-Christianity. The only realistic way to combat the fascist demonology is with theology. The real question is not religion *versus* science, but, What religion?

Rather than indicating religion to be passé, fascism demonstrates at least the power and expedience of religion, if not its inevitability. It has retaught us the significance of the thing called "faith."

Faith has had a low rating in the modern world. It wasn't in good scientific standing. It suggested dogmatism, the closed mind, a persistence in unintelligence. It stood forth in contrast to knowledge, the new mountain-mover. According to a cult of popular psychology, it was synonymous with wishful thinking: faith consisted of believing those comfortable things that one wanted to believe. As the proverbial "little boy" defined it, faith was believing something that you know ain't so. And in a world of dazzling engineering feats the idea of salvation by faith appeared horse-and-buggy-like. It was too ethereal, too much a matter of private idiosyncrasy, to play a leading part in the world's affairs.

But now have we seen faith reconfirmed as the great mountain-mover. It is not a thing that tender-minded people escape into, but a source of purpose and strength. Our faith provides our hold upon life; it is our concep-

tion of the truth about the What-is on its way toward becoming the What-will-be; it is both our approach to reality and our reality. On faith we stand firm and endure, when endurance is called for; and by faith we move forward to make history. If our lives have substance, our faith makes it; if our lives have significance, it is because they are integrated, sustained and interpreted by a faith. The question is, What faith will it be?

## IV

I think that question describes the basic nature of the present crisis. History has put us on the spot by resolving itself into an either-or situation, saying, "Choose you this day whom you shall serve." The half-and-half character of modern culture is about to be replaced by a whole: there is to be a decisive choosing of values, of goal, of direction, faith, philosophy, religion.

It is a perhaps justifiable simplification of the issue to say that the choice lies between fascism and Christianity. For fascism makes explicit those things implicit in modern culture which constituted a defiance of Christianity: it brings out into the full light and studs with jewels that which modernity secretly, indirectly and even unsuspectingly trusted and venerated in its conscious and unconscious spiritual rebellion against Christianity. But this statement of the issue is dangerous unless one understands that it is a simplification, and that "fascism" is being used in a broad, symbolic sense.

From the spiritual standpoint, fascism is an old sin streamlined and brought out under a new trademark — a sin with many versions. Adam and Eve committed it when they ate the fruit that would presumably make them gods; so did the builders of the Tower of Babel



when they resolved that earth-dwellers were going to achieve the power and enjoy the privileges of those who dwelt in heaven.

What is that sin? It is the assumption, or even the quest, in some form of the right and capacity to act for oneself and especially towards others as if one had the completeness, independence, sufficiency, virtue, knowledge, power, authority or unlimitedness of deity. The assumption of the right to dictate to others with regard to those choices which a person must be allowed to make for himself in order to be a person, or the assumption of the responsibility for making such choices for other people, is one vivid manifestation of this sin — a manifestation exhibited in older days by absolute monarchs, Catholic inquisitors and Calvinist theocrats, and in later days by bearers of the white man's burden among "backward" peoples, by monopolistic capitalism, by fascist and communist regimes, by the bishop of Rome, by anyone and everyone who makes a bid for total power or absolute authority.

The sin is by no means uniquely modern. But modern culture has cultivated it, having tended in many ways to affirm man as self-made and self-sufficient, as capable of making the complete conquest and performing the perfect deed, as holding destiny within his own hands, as embodying the source and end of his meaning. To crown it all, there have come upon the scene the men-gods.

Of course if men were capable of living up to these affirmations — if they had the wisdom and power to win the perfect victory, achieve the complete thing, create and re-create the rules surrounding the human game; if they were self-contained, omnipotent and all the rest of it — there would be nothing wrong about this. The



pride and ruthlessness accompanying and begotten by these presumptions would be truth and righteousness. But here lies the hitch. These affirmations are not in accord with the facts. Men are not gods, and when they act as if they were they become demonic and self-destroying. Presuming that they are subject to nothing superior or extra-human, that they are able to write with their own wills the very laws of life, they turn with unmitigated fury upon those members of their own species who disagree with them, oppose them or stand in their way, thus creating a situation of mutual insecurity and internecine conflict, and making murder, oppression, fear and hate the stock instruments for maintaining their life. And with nothing to check their pride except their own ultimate self-ruin, recognizing nothing which convicts them of sin or reminds them of their grave limitations, they move from one headstrong crime to another until engulfed in wreck and chaos.

It is this thing in all its myriad forms which the living generations must choose or decide against. Shall men live under God, or shall they attempt to play God? Shall they seek knowledge of that given reality on which their life depends, or shall they assert their own wills in defiance of everything else?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> C. E. Ayres in his article on John Dewey, *New Republic*, Jan. 18, 1939.

<sup>2</sup> Chase in *Harper's Magazine*, Nov., Dec., 1937.



## Christianity in Three Words

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THERE IS no magic formula in Christianity. It cannot guarantee us any foolproof or cocksure device for transforming the world into Utopia. The most it can do — though what a great deal this is — is to place man in the presence of moral-spiritual truth, keep reminding him of that truth, leaven his life with it (if he will let it), humble him for his failures to live in perfect harmony with it, restrain him from persevering in presumptuous sin, restore him after repentance to the way where his health is to be found, present the eternal issues to him, keep him aware of the realm where his true being is gained or lost. There is no way of forcing anyone to accept this truth, nor of assuring the efficacy of its operation in anyone's life. Some minds will comprehend it and some hearts will be opened to it more than others, while some will persist in being impervious to it altogether.

What is this truth which Christianity grasps? Christianity is a doctrine of the nature of man and a doctrine of the nature of God (that given reality, viewed from a moral-spiritual standpoint, amid which man lives, on which he depends and to which he is subject). Since I have already had a good deal to say here and there about the nature of man, and since I am constrained to be brief, I shall say something only of Christianity's understanding of the character of God.

The writer of the first letter of John summarized this understanding in three words. "God," he said, "is love." \* In framing that statement the early Christians were describing not a moral ideal, but their conception of the moral-spiritual nature of that reality amid which man lives, on which he depends and to which he is subject. Love was their ethic, not because they thought it would be nice if people would only be that way, but because they saw that reality is of such a nature as to require it. Love was no more an idealization than is the law of gravity. It was the principle of life men must obey if they were really to live. If you accept the law of love you cross from the realm of death into the realm of life; you cease to live in fear and begin to live in confidence; you find the pearl of great price; you drink from the well of living water springing up unto eternal life; you live in God and God lives in you; you are like the sensible man who built his house upon a foundation of rock. But if you don't accept the law of love you live in death; that which has been given to you will be taken away; you are like the foolish man who built his house on sand. God is love — and also "wrath"; for the same structure of reality that gives men support when they cooperate with it deals out destruction when they refuse to cooperate with it.

John Macmurray has presented a powerful argument for the realism of the Christian insight by amplifying St. John's observation that love casts out fear.<sup>1</sup> When we do not live in love, says Macmurray, we live in isolation, and all our actions are dominated by fear. We are

\* The great pre-Christian prophets used the term "righteousness," which, according to their interpretations, meant almost exactly the same thing as "love." The chief difference between prophetic Judaism and Christianity arose from the fact that the latter was emancipated from racialism.

arrayed against our fellows and our fellows are arrayed against us. Thus are we at war with the very sources of our nourishment. Our living becomes a cringing existence which is spiritual death. An ax is laid at the roots of spontaneity, trust, generosity, and all positive and creative action. We become engaged in a predominantly defensive enterprise. Through fear our energy is paralyzed, or else we are converted into armed cruisers, always on the lookout for danger, ever prepared to flee or to wreak destruction. In fear we not only cower before every unknown but point a nervous pistol towards it. We are enclosed within ourselves, and, as the ancient mystery cults expressed it, the body becomes "the tomb of the soul." (A spiritual exercise which might well be required of all Christians is the answering of this question: How many deeds, attitudes and policies that are marring the life of the world can be traced to an origin in fear? This exercise would not only strengthen our belief in the truth of Christianity, but would also reveal to us the degree to which our world lives in death.)

## II

But what is the character of love? "We know we have crossed from death to life," declares the first letter of John, "because we love the brotherhood; he who has no love for his brother remains in death." And then, well aware that there is genuine love and counterfeit love, the writer added: "Whoever possesses this world's goods, and notices his brother in need, and shuts his heart against him, how can love to God remain in him? My dear children, let us put our love not into words or into talk but into deeds, and make it real." Jesus said the same thing when answering the question, "Who is my neighbor?" with the parable of the good Samari-



tan. And the first Christians at Jerusalem showed what they meant by love by holding all things in common.

Such cautions, clarifications and examples, however, have not been able to keep the meaning of Christian love uncorrupted with confusion. For one thing, there is the use of the word by such varied and conflicting interests as the poets, moralists, psychologists and motion picture producers. And for another thing, there is ever present the corrosive work of the sentimentalist — he who seeks to achieve his ends through feeling that they are already realized, and who identifies values with his emotional apprehension of them.

A few years ago an elderly clergyman was talking to me about his experiences during the World War. "One thing good I've got to say for the war," he remarked, "is that it united the people in this city in a brotherly spirit. People who had bickered with each other and hardly spoken to each other for years buried their hatchets and worked together with one accord." This was the experience, I may add, of the nation as a whole. I was living in the south at that time, and I recall verbal expressions of mutual respect between white and black as they joined hands in a common crusade. But what were the facts about this "brotherly spirit"? It was a ghost without a body, an ideal realized only in terms of feeling. It came and went without altering a single unbrotherly arrangement in the structure of our social life. This is the manner in which the sentimentalist interprets Christian love. John Macmurray's name for it is "pseudo-religion," and he calls it Christianity's enemy number one. (By the way, here is a place where semantics could be used to good purpose.)

The word "love" is generally understood in our culture as referring to a warm inner experience, a tender

feeling, an expansive emotion, like, says Webster, the feeling of a mother for her child, or the attachment to one of the opposite sex, or the fondness between friend and friend. But this is only confusing when we are trying to understand the meaning of love as used by Christianity.

In the first place, it is obvious that none of the feelings belonging to these specific cases can be universalized or extended to include more than a very small number of people. Friend and friend, husband and wife, parent and child are special and limited relationships.

In the second place — and this is far more important — love cannot be distinguished as Christian or unchristian upon the basis of how it feels to the one experiencing it. The love which is a disguised self-indulgence and the love which is genuinely altruistic may, so far as we can ever know, feel exactly alike. The affection which annexes its object like an octopus, stunting, thwarting and enslaving the personality of the one so loved, probably feels just as affectionate and sincere as any other love. The good will of one pleasantly intoxicated by alcohol, by a stroke of success, by overactive endocrines, by a college fraternity ritual, by a tribal dance or a mystical state, may be quite as “good-willish” an inner experience as the emotion of one who labors for just working agreements between employer and employed.

Love, therefore, as Christianity understands it, must refer to something beyond feeling, to something outside an inner experience, and it cannot be defined primarily in terms of emotion. It must have some criterion other than feeling. It must be referred to an objective *structure* of reality, rather than to a mood or state of experience.

Gregory Vlastos has stated this incisively by calling love "an inner experience and a pattern of social relatedness." Love is Christian, he says, when it refers to "that cooperative community in which my labor is necessary to your interest and your labor to mine,"<sup>2</sup> when it involves practical, material activity. When a social group recognizes the common need of its members for a school, a highway or a health clinic, and cooperates to build these things (from which all will benefit equally, or according to their needs), it is recognizing to that extent the fact of mutuality; it is practicing love.

### III

Susan Glaspell once wrote a story called "Pollen."<sup>3</sup> It is a story about Ira Mead and his corn — and the structure of the universe.

Ira was a silent, solitary man, shut up within himself. Even as a little boy he had been that way, playing by himself, carrying out his own plans and refusing to cooperate in any group plan. His mother said of him, "You don't know what's on his mind; you have to let Ira alone; he will do it in his own way." And people did let Ira alone. He never said anything to you if you never said anything to him; and when you spoke to him you had a feeling that what you had said didn't come into direct communication with what he was thinking.

When Ira was grown he concentrated exclusively on his farm. His neighbors, the Dietzes and Balches, tried sometimes to be friendly with him, but there was no use: Ira always rebuffed them. The thing he came most to care about was corn. There was no foolishness about corn. It was a thing to make a special appeal to a man who wanted to be self-sufficient and to make his own thing perfect in itself. So Ira concentrated upon raising

corn. He experimented with it, gave everything he had to it, and succeeded in developing a new species which won prizes at the state fair and became the envy of his fellow farmers. But when anyone asked for seed Ira would say, "Guess it's all spoke for this year," and drive on.

But corn had a peculiar weakness. It had to associate with other corn. You could actually see it doing it. For two years now Ira had been forced to admit that his corn which grew next to the Balches was inferior. And one summer afternoon he stood and witnessed the inexorable truth. The trade wind was blowing pollen from the Balches' field to his. Winds blew right across boundary lines, carrying the life that changed other life. It was a maddening fact to one who wanted to be self-sufficient; but it was a fact nevertheless, and Ira couldn't deny it any longer.

So one evening he put some seed corn in a sack and picked up his hat. "Where are you goin'?" asked his mother. "To the Balches." "Why — what are you goin' to the Balches for?" "To take them seed and tell them all I know about raisin' corn." "What are you goin' to do that for?" "Because I can't have good corn while their corn's poor."

In a strange way, this story of a miserly man and his reluctant deed is an illustration of the nature and meaning of Christian love. Its lack of all the emotion usually associated with the word "love" serves to emphasize the hard practical nature of love. Ira was forced to recognize at least one fact of mutuality, although he recognized it in a negative sense; and he was forced to cooperate with his neighbors for a common end, although he did it grudgingly. By doing two things to this story it could be transformed into an example of love in all



its fullness: first, expand it from corn raising to the whole of life; and second, make it positive and creative rather than negative and defensive — i.e., let the principle of mutuality become the desire and will of Ira Mead.

Thus we come around to what was said at the outset: Love is seen by Christianity as a law of life grounded in the structure of reality; and we have to "put it into deeds."

Here, says Christianity, is the gist of the truth about creation. It was created for man to find life in. But in order for him to find life in it he must abide by certain rules (or come to "know God" and learn to submit to the "will of God"). The sum and substance of those rules is that men can find their full life only in accepting the fact of their community. The acceptance and practice of this truth is "eternal life," is "living in God," is entrance into the "Kingdom of God" (which exists now imperfectly and is still to come in completeness).

As the Beatitudes say it: Fortunate are those who "feel their spiritual need" — the Kingdom of God is theirs! Fortunate are "the mourners" (those whose hearts are burdened with the moral evils of the day, who sense their share of the blame and are repentant) — they will be consoled! Fortunate are "the humble" (those who do not pretend overmuch, who do not scheme to win power and privileges at the expense of their fellows, who do not practice ruthless imperialism) — they will inherit the earth! Fortunate are those who "hunger and thirst for goodness," knowing that they have not achieved enough of it — they will be satisfied! Fortunate are "the merciful" — they will receive mercy! Fortunate are "the pure in heart" (those who are free from ulterior motives, who desire that which is whole-

some for everyone to desire, who seek no exclusive privilege and no value which cannot be shared by the whole community, who love only the common good) — they will see God! Fortunate are “the peacemakers” (those who promote the recognition and acceptance of mutuality) — they will be ranked sons of God! And fortunate are those who endure persecution because they follow a way of life which threatens to upset the apple-carts of selfishness and parochialism — the Kingdom of God is theirs!

## IV

We are now in a position to state the Christian conception of the relationship between the spiritual and the material, and to set up standards which will help us know when our concern for the spiritual becomes ethereal, and when our concern for the material becomes materialism.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible, which is the chief source book of our religion, has in it plenty of concern for materials, and also plenty of condemnation of the concern for materials, so that if a person wants to be contentious for one side or the other, or wants to promote bafflement, he can find numerous texts to support him.

Yet the Bible starts off in a rather bad way for those who think that material things are inherently mean and that Christianity is not concerned with them. It begins with the creation of the material, and says that after each act of creation God looked upon what he had done and called it good. The promised land which the Israelites sought and finally reached is described in terms such as the California chambers of commerce used to employ — before too many people got to believing them and going out there. It was a land “flowing with milk and honey,”

a country of "streams of water," of "wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a country where you can eat and never famish," "a country whose ore is iron and from whose hills you can dig copper." The later prophetic visions of an Israel purged of her infidelities and redeemed from her sins always included material elements: "They shall build houses and inhabit them, they shall plant vineyards and enjoy the fruit." Nor does the emergence of Christianity diminish this note to any marked degree. Jesus broke Sabbath laws to heal the sick, and sanctioned their breaking in order that his hungry disciples might eat. As he announced his mission in the synagogue at Nazareth it was a promise of salvation from depressing physical circumstances as much as from anything else.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me:  
For he has consecrated me to preach good news to the poor,  
He has sent me to proclaim release for captives  
And recovery of sight for the blind,  
To set free the oppressed,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.<sup>5</sup>

And in that brief classic prayer for the basic essentials there is included the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread."

On the other hand, there is plenty of condemnation of the concern for material things. Amos pronounces woe upon the careless citizens of Samaria "who are like gods in Israel" — lolling on their ivory divans, sprawling on their silken cushions, dining off fresh lamb and fattened veal. Isaiah pronounces woe upon the men who add house to house, who join one field to another. Jesus warns that it is impossible to serve both God and Mammon, that where your treasure lies there will your

heart lie also. To the rich young man seeking eternal life he prescribed giving his wealth away, adding that it is much easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. To his followers he said: "See and keep clear of covetousness in every shape and form, for a man's life does not lie in the amplitude of his wealth." And then he told a parable about a man of large estate whose crops were so heavy that he had to build larger barns, and who, when he had filled them full, said: "Soul, you have everything to make you secure and content for many a year; take your ease, rejoice, eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool, this very night your life is ended, and who will get all that you have prepared?" "Thus fares the man," said Jesus,

who lays up treasure for himself instead of gaining the riches of God. Therefore do not trouble about what you are to eat and drink, and what you are to wear on your body: pagans make all that their aim in life. But seek you first the Kingdom of God, and you will have of these other things more than you need.<sup>6</sup>

St. Paul wrote in his first letter to Timothy:

If we have food and clothes we must be content with that. Those who are eager to be rich get tempted and caught in many senseless and evil propensities that drag men down to ruin and destruction. For love of money is the root of all mischief.

But these two groups of testimony give no aid and comfort to those who see a sharp dividing line between the spiritual and the material. It is not a case of one *versus* the other, but a case of complementary relationship. In none of the foregoing instances are material



things indicted because they are material things. What is condemned is the conditions under which they are sometimes sought and enjoyed, the ends to which they are devoted, the values around which they are organized.

Amos pronounced doom upon the sprawlers on silken cushions in Samaria because these cushions had been bought with money squeezed from the poor, because the men who enjoyed them did so at the expense of their fellows: they were "careless" citizens, a "dissolute crew" who had "never a single thought for the bleeding wounds of the nation," who were, moreover, the inflictors of these wounds. Isaiah pronounced woe upon the men who added house to house and field to field because these men were dispossessing other people, were monopolizing the means of the common life. As he said, they were joining one field to another "till there is room for none but them in all the land." What Jesus said about wealth was not an indictment of the economic means whereby men live, but an indictment of certain forms in which wealth is desired, gained and used. What was condemned was that gain-seeking and that possession of wealth which deny mutuality, sever a man from the community of his fellows, create class distinctions and special privileges and powers. This is the point of the parable of the man of large estate.

This man's land yielded very heavy crops, so heavy that he had no room in which to store them. In itself, this was a good thing, for a harvest represents the means of life. To ignore this spiritual aspect of the material is to be guilty of ethereality. Nor is it materialism to work for a harvest, to desire one or to rejoice in one. The question of materialism arises when it comes to the disposal of the harvest. And here it was that the planter went astray, becoming a servant of Mammon. He de-

cided to build himself larger barns, to detach his harvest from the community in which it was produced and to use it for his own exclusive security and enjoyment. What God's soil and rain and sunshine, and the labor of his fellows, had produced, the plantation owner pre-empted for himself alone. "Soul," he said to himself, "you have enough laid up for many years. While others worry about how their children are to be fed, you may take your ease, eat, drink and be merry." And that very night the same creation which put fertility in his land, sent rain and sunshine upon it, and gave him the human society of which he was an antisocial member, wrote a period at the end of his materialistic sentence. And the story would have been complete had an inheritance tax got most of his harvest.

Materialism is not concern for materials. The excited state of economic desire which our business world deliberately cultivates is indeed a sort of materialism. But what makes it materialism is the selfish form of our desires. We want to be Big Successes in the eyes of our fellows, dazzle them with the sheen of our possessions and the scale of our expenditures, win prestige and power, lead lives of glamor and self-indulgence. The idea that modern Western technology is essentially materialistic, that its multiplication of material goods diverts our minds from spiritual values, is an unfortunate piece of sentimental and confused thinking. There is no inherent conflict between material goods and spiritual values. Either is meaningless without the other. The machine may serve materialistic purposes, but that's the fault of the men and of the social organization which use them. The machine is actually one of the greatest instruments of cooperative community in the world. It binds men together in ever closer interdependence,

makes mutuality a conspicuous fact and a glaring necessity. There is nothing wrong with the machine's multiplication of goods. Our world needs more production, not less. The question of materialism *versus* spirituality, of Mammon or God, arises only when it comes to the purpose for which goods are produced and the manner in which they are distributed. Who directs the machine, and for what end? Is it used like the estate of the man in Jesus' parable? Is it used for the special, private advantage of a few, thereby resulting in higher barriers of class, power and privilege among men? Or is it used as an instrument of the community for the community? Is it subjected to the law of love? Those are the spiritual questions that Christianity asks. They are spiritual questions, but they are not ethereal ones.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Macmurray, *Creative Society* — one of the meatiest books written in this generation.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Vlastos, "The Ethical Foundations," *Towards the Christian Revolution*, edited by R. B. Y. Scott and Gregory Vlastos (Willett, Clark & Co., 1936), p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Harper's Magazine*, March 1919.

<sup>4</sup> In this section I am obviously indebted to Gregory Vlastos' essay in *Towards the Christian Revolution*.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>6</sup> See Luke 12:16-30.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

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### The Significance of the Church

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**A**LTHOUGH the Christian faith requires "works," expresses itself in works and cannot exist discarnate from them; although that faith and its works imply and would certainly bring revolutionary changes in society and history; and although it is manifest that revolutionary changes are required to prevent civilization from being undone by its own best citizens, those matters lie beyond the scope of this writing—and perhaps some wit will truthfully add, "beyond the scope of this author." I have no intention of offering a "solution of the present crisis," of drawing up a "must list" of revolutionary changes, or of proposing a "specific program of Christian action."

Not only is this a special subject in itself, and one concerning which I feel no special burden of wisdom, but I have great doubts as to the present preparedness of any considerable body of Christian men and women to carry through such a program if it could be outlined. Although it is not good form to say so, I am afraid that Christianity is so dimly understood and so weakly held by the overwhelming majority of contemporary Christians that whatever big social solution they might undertake to effect would be undertaken and effected according to some light other than that of the Christian gospel, and so would amount to another demonic force making



another mad, self-righteous bid for total power in the world.

If this statement is disappointing to some readers, what I am about to say will be jolting. For the one specific recommendation I make is that men come back to the church. I hasten to add that my reason for this recommendation is not that anything would be finally settled by such an act, but that the church, for all its faults, happens to be the only institution whose primary object is the seeking and teaching of the Christian gospel, on the basis of which or in the light of which alone I believe our life and health are to be securely found. I view this as nothing but a beginning, but I think it is the sure first step.

This suggestion, I am aware, will be met with the reaction of Naaman, in the Old Testament story, to the prescription of Elisha. Naaman, military commander for the king of Syria, was a valiant man, but he was a leper. At the persuasion of a servant in his household he went down to Israel to consult the famous Elisha about a cure. Elisha's advice was: "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored sound and clean." Naaman was enraged. "Here I have been saying to myself," he stormed, "'He will surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand toward the place and cure the leper.' But he asks me only to do this undramatic and unheroic deed — dip seven times in that mean and muddy creek, when the land of Syria has rivers seven times more noble and clear!"<sup>1</sup>

The suggestion that men must return to the church sounds contemptible not only to those who have no shred of understanding of, or belief in, Christianity, but also to many who in a half-hearted and mentally vague

way do have some belief in Christianity. These last, like Naaman with his general belief in Elisha but distrust of what Elisha particularly said, admit Christianity to be morally good and theoretically true, but have no confidence in the church, and so are not disposed to bother themselves with regularly resorting to the church or with participating in its life as responsible members. While this position involves both logical contradiction and moral irresponsibility, it can be made plausible by pointing out the glaring sins and ineffectualness of the church.

These sins and weaknesses are not to be glossed over or defended. The church is a human institution subject to all the weaknesses of the flesh, and at one time or another, and in one way or another, it has exhibited all those weaknesses. What institution hasn't? More than thrice it has denied its Lord. It has sought its own life. It has been enlarged with pride and enriched with bribes. It has walked warily in times of turmoil, remained silent when it should have spoken, and failed in the hour of crisis to make any significant gesture beneath the sun. It has become divided within itself. Yes, its first task today is an "inside job." It stands at present in that naked condition of having to rediscover and re-confess its own gospel, and of having to find an appropriate and effective way for testifying to the Christian faith in this time. But these facts neither excuse anyone for remaining aloof from the church, nor render the church negligible. For the fact still stands that the church has that the presentation and guardianship of which no other institution has ever sought to take over, namely, the Christian gospel. In spite of all its defects, the church continues to be the only place where men come and associate together for the one purpose of recognizing

their needs as moral-spiritual beings, of recognizing the moral-spiritual dimension in which their life is gained or lost, of exposing their minds and hearts and wills to the Christian insights about this all-important matter.

Unless one desires to dispose of the church and all that it represents, the only relevant attitude toward it is that expressed in William Pierson Merrill's well known hymn:

Rise up, O men of God!  
The church for you doth wait,  
Her strength unequal to her task;  
Rise up, and make her great!

Men need the church because it is the trustee of that truth against which they need continually to check and recheck their individual and social lives. The church has been, it is true, an often negligent, inefficient and insincere trustee. It is guilty of having laid its gospel away as if for safekeeping, of having all but forgotten it; but despite numerous infidelities it has never thrown its treasure away. And the significant thing to be noted about this treasure is that it can be adulterated; it can be preserved as in embalming fluid; it can be wrapped up in the insulation of ecclesiasticism, official ceremony, sonorous ritual, and left to molder for years in a dank cathedral; yet the life in it is never completely killed. These misfortunes have happened more than once, and may happen again; yet ever and anon the Christian gospel has exhibited its power to quicken into new life and change its guardians into servants. Even now it is breaking forth to make its keepers ashamed and to throw a beam of light into the world's gloom. The church has in it the Great Possibility. It "is the only organism within a nation which by its very nature must be loyal

to God beyond the state, to humanity beyond the nation, to the Kingdom of God beyond any actual social order." <sup>2</sup> It has the thing which men have been seeking after in other places. Where else but in the church are men to seek knowledge of that God who is not an idol or the apotheosized will of a particular group of willful men? As Jacob said after a terrifying night, "What an awesome place! The Eternal must be here, and I never knew it." <sup>3</sup> Of all gospels, only the Christian one is thoroughly wise to man's perennial tendency to unqualified pride and presumption, wherein he sets up the relative as absolute, regards his partial goodness as perfection, endeavors to play the role of God, and in such endeavoring becomes demonic.

Men need the church; but the church also needs men. She is "unequal to her task." Her greatness is always potential as well as actual, and this is one of the several times in history when it is mostly the former. She needs the talent, the intelligence, the energy, insight, experience and wealth which men have been spending in other places — often spending blindly, in thousands of uncoordinated trickles, in ill-directed spurts, with romantic hopes and unwarranted pretensions.

Not for many years has the church looked like anything more than another social institution making its bid for public support along with a dozen other equally good if not more useful organizations. But history is prodding us to re-examine that judgment. It is driving us to see a new significance in the church.

In ancient Greek thought the prime necessity for civilization was thought to be a *polis*, a word we translate as "city," but which seems originally to have meant the circuit wall about a city. The reason for the formation of cities, and the most important thing about them for



many centuries, was this *polis*, this wall which enclosed them. The city wall gave to early man that reserve of security and that necessity for cooperation which made the rise of civilization possible. It provided a defense against the enemy from without; and by establishing a cell of order, peace and cooperation, it tamed and disciplined the brute within. Inside the wall men did not live in constant peril of their lives; they could rest and breathe more freely. And inside the wall they had that other primal necessity, fire, a common fire which must never be allowed to die. Through that fire and that wall man became a member of civilized society, bound to cooperate with others as they with him, a society based on mutual protection, mutual aid, and the observance of common laws and standards. The city, observed Aristotle, was built in order that man might live; it continues in order that he may "live well."

The modern situation has shaped itself up in such a manner as to impress upon us in a fresh way the need for a *polis*, a bulwark against barbarism without and within, a place where the fire that enables men to live may be kept brightly burning. And history is coming more and more to suggest that the Christian church might be that place, and the Christian faith that fire. It is not altogether unlikely that a time is approaching when men will go to "the Eternal's house" with a gladness celebrated by the ancient psalmist, seeking and finding there their meaning, confidence, light and hope in an otherwise crazy, cringing, despairing world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> II Kings 5.

<sup>2</sup> Bennett, *Christianity and Our World*, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 28:16-17.



## Christianity, Authoritarianism and Democracy

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MY AIM in the writing of this book has been elementary in the kindergarten sense. Although all the problems in earth and heaven have been touched upon, indirectly if not directly, I have sought only to produce a primer, or perhaps the introduction to a primer. The twenty questions that spring from my thesis, the inevitable demand for an elaborated theory or vision of what my premises anticipate or require in civilization, culture and history, lie beyond my present purpose and must be deferred to Christian men to work out in their collective efforts to explore and translate the meaning of the gospel, or must be deferred to wiser minds — or to a later book. But one of these questions is made so pressing by the circumstances of the time, and has so fundamental a bearing upon the nature and meaning of Christianity, that it cannot be passed on to someone else or postponed to a more convenient day. That is the question of authoritarianism *versus* democracy, the answer to which involves a world of difference.

I have maintained in this protracted homily that our only hope lies in a return to the Christian faith, and have indicated as the first step a return to the church for the purpose of learning, confessing and exploring that faith. Foremost among the questions raised by such a

thesis is this one, which I shall state in several ways: Does a regnant Christianity call for a form of totalitarianism? What will be the role of the church in a culture that accepts a Christian orientation? Must it sit up on top of the social structure as in the Middle Ages? Will the clergy constitute a dictatorial bureaucracy? Does the sovereignty of God imply a theocracy? Does the supremacy of the Christian gospel require an authoritarian, monarchical, aristocratic, inquisitorial rule? Does submission to the will of God carry with it a submission to some hierarchy whose function it is to interpret the will of God in the concrete cases of present history?

There are three reasons why a great many people, both within and without the church, believe that religion in general and Christianity in particular is inherently authoritarian. First, there are the examples of religion in history. Almost everywhere that religious institutions have been nourished by a salubrious climate they have been authoritarian. One immediately thinks of Judaism in its legalistic period, of Islam under the caliphs, of medieval Christianity, of Geneva in the heyday of John Calvin, of seventeenth century New England where the parsons were the "persons" who ruled their parishes and ministered only to God. Also, there are the innumerable examples among primitive cultures of a medicine man or a priest-king commanding obedience through "divine" power. Indeed, all forms of absolutist government have been justified on religious grounds. These examples prove nothing beyond themselves, but they are highly suggestive.

In the second place, there is the attitude cultivated and required by religion — the attitude of reverence, supplianee and obedience. Religion recognizes that

man is a dependent and incomplete creature, brought forth by a creation greater than himself, subject to facts and laws and principles that he had no part in determining, and that he must find his life by accepting and submitting to the given structure of reality. This attitude, as history abundantly shows, yields easily to authoritarian rule. In fact, it is certain to lend itself to authoritarian exploitation unless there are explicit safeguards in the accepted religious theory or in the prevailing social conditions. It is never easy for men to distinguish between what God has ordained and what man has established, between the structure of eternal reality and the structure of a temporal culture; and it is usually plausible for princes and gubernatorial institutions to claim that their rule is based upon eternal verities or reflects the sovereignty of God in such a way as to justify reverence and submission toward them. Rendering unto God and unto Caesar become identical when Caesar is able to make himself appear the regent of God.

And third, there are the claims of religion and the practical problem of asserting those claims in the world of human society. The essence of religion is its claim to hold the values about which life shall be organized. This claim is made upon the basis of another, namely, that the values attested by the religion in question spring from the structure of reality, thus representing not the will of man but the will of God. Religion, therefore, claims to embody the world's supreme truth and man's arch necessity.

Obviously, this claim does not suggest parliamentary principles. God is not a democrat. His will is authoritarian. It is embodied in the given structure of reality, and so is not determined by the votes of men. It emanates from the order of creation, and the welfare of crea-



tion's children lies in a willing acceptance of it. Moreover, since the will of God is man's arch necessity, is it not the duty and right of men of religion to make it as plainly necessary as possible in the social world, even to compel its acceptance if that were possible? For how can you afford to be neutral or democratic with regard to supreme truth; how can you look with equanimity upon dissent; how can you permit debate; how can you fail to protect and promote this truth in every manner feasible?

To a great many people, no doubt to the majority of people through the Christian centuries, it has seemed that the only answer to these questions is authoritarianism. Medieval Christianity viewed the matter that way; John Calvin saw it that way; the Puritans of seventeenth century England and New England saw it that way. So did many of the leaders of democracy and liberalism, and for that reason they were religious rebels. The Roman Catholic Church has never ceased to stand for the authoritarian principle, and has been emboldened to affirm that position today without apology. Protestants have never been wholly certain and consistent about the question, and for the moment they are particularly muddled.

Current expressions of the Catholic point of view, while drawn indirectly from the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, are usually based upon, or parallel, the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on the Christian constitution of states, issued in 1885. That encyclical expressly repudiates democracy as a principle of government and reproaches those states in which "all government is nothing more or less than the will of the people, and the people, being under the power of itself alone, is alone its own ruler," and where laws are "framed according to

the delusive caprices and opinions of the mass of the people." The reason for this position is that men owe allegiance to the knowledge of the will of God which is contained within the Christian religion (Roman Catholic version). When the will of God is known, why give capricious men an opportunity to express a contrary will? When you have supreme truth, why give error the leeway provided by democracy? As Pope Leo said, "It is repugnant to reason that the false and the true should have the same rights." It is the duty of men to accept this truth. It is the duty of the state to recognize it as official and to support it with all its instruments. And since the church is the organ of God's will on earth, the recipient, guardian and dispenser of supreme truth, its right to superintend every form of civil life should be recognized; its regulations should be sanctioned as civil law; its enemies should be quelled.

There are some differences of opinion as to how far the church, or the state in collaboration with the church, should go in seeking conformity and combating heresy. The literary organ of the largest Catholic diocese in the world, the *Tablet* of Brooklyn, New York, contends that the church has the right to punish heresy with death.<sup>1</sup> Father John A. Ryan of the National Catholic Welfare Council stands for an intolerant form of toleration. He thinks that the profession and practice of heretical religions might be permitted "within the family, or in such an inconspicuous manner as to be an occasion neither of scandal nor of perversion to the faithful."<sup>2</sup> Professor Jacques Maritain, the eminent French Catholic critic, thinks that true religion has a right to receive unlimited support from the organs of temporal power, even to the point of brute force, but considers such support dangerous and unwise. He suggests that a state,

collaborating dutifully with the regnant church, might, without recognizing any right in heresy as such, allow the heretic his liberties as a citizen, and might even grant him a juridical status adapted to his ideas and moral habits.<sup>3</sup> Just what a juridical status adapted to the ideas and moral habits of a heretic would be like, I do not know; but it sounds like a polite description of a status of pariahhood.

## II

It is hard for Protestants to think rationally about these contentions because of the dreadful visions of what might happen to them if the authoritarianists should get into power. But the question here is not who shall be punished for heresy, but whether or not Christianity is by nature authoritarian. If Christianity requires its own brand of totalitarianism, then we have some radical readjustments to make. And if it is not authoritarian, then it is up to us to state and uphold the Christian reasons for democracy.

My conviction is that the authoritarian interpretation of Christianity rests upon a fallacy; that it is made possible through a failure to distinguish between God and men; and that authoritarianism vitiates Christianity, ultimately transforming it into its opposite.

I am impressed by the glaring contrast between the authoritarianists' discussion of what to do with heretics and the attitude of the New Testament writers. St. Paul, for example, believes Christianity to be supreme truth and man's arch necessity, and in his letter to the Romans he speaks of God's anger as "breaking forth from heaven against all the impiety and wickedness of the men who in their wickedness are suppressing the truth." These men, says Paul, through their obstinacy

and impenitence, are storing up wrath for themselves "on the day of wrath when the justice of God will burst forth." But does he counsel the faithful to take up the cudgels of wrath against the men who deny God's truth and rebel against his will? Does he advocate the declaration of a Christian dictatorship in order that error may be suppressed and truth and right be made to prevail? Far from it. He writes as follows:

Bless your persecutors; bless them, do not curse them. . . . Live in harmony with one another. . . . Do not be conceited. Do not pay anyone back with evil for evil. . . . If possible, for your part, live peaceably with everybody. Do not take your revenge, dear friends, *but leave room for God's anger*; for the Scripture says, Vengeance is *mine*, says the Lord; *I will pay them back*. No! If your enemy is hungry, feed him! If he is thirsty, give him something to drink!

Beginning with the same reverence for the Christian faith, and the same belief in its reality, as the Christian solidarians, St. Paul comes out with a radically different attitude toward heretics. Plainly, something goes wrong in the reasoning process of the Christian totalitarians, for they wind up with conclusions that are conspicuously unchristian. Where they go astray is in their failure to distinguish between God and men, a distinction St. Paul so clearly recognizes. God will take vengeance, he declares, against those who defy the divine will. Why? Because God's will is the structure of reality: men cannot defy the basic principles of life and get away with it. But you men who seek to obey the will of God, you are not to take vengeance. Why not? Because that is God's responsibility and function, and you are not competent to do it. You are too limited in virtue, knowledge and power to play the role of God. For one thing, you are



too egoistic; your vengeance will be mixed with selfish and personal reasons; you will degrade yourselves into sheer imperialists, murderers and men of demonic passions.

Herein lies the great error of Christian authoritarianists. They reason that, since God is absolute, the men who serve God are entitled to be absolutists. The inference is fallacious, because men are not God. Men may serve the will of God, but because they are men they never become imbued with God's will except in a partial degree; and the fact that they serve him does not imply that they have either the right or the duty to rule like God himself. Indeed, whenever a man or a hierarchy of men claim that the truth and necessity of their religion entitle them to hold a monarchical position and to receive unquestioning obedience from humankind, they are presuming a perfect wisdom, an infallible knowledge and a sinless nature which no mortal actually possesses; they are presuming to play God; and they are placing themselves in a situation where their limitations will sooner or later discredit not only their rule, but also the truth of their religion and even the deity of their God. Such men are guilty of blasphemy. They are the consummate heretics. They inevitably become demonic.

One can observe this error slipping unobtrusively into the minds of the authoritarianists when they think about the nature of the church. (Neo-Thomists had better watch their step here; they are following a man who, when he has led them half-way up the mountain of truth, may plunge them down a precipice.) Professor Maritain distinguishes between Christians and Christianity in terms of Catholics and Catholicism. If you want to know what Catholicism is, he says, do not look at the

errors, apathies, shortcomings and slumbers of us Catholics. Avert your eyes from us poor sinners, and turn them rather to the pope and the episcopate teaching the faith and morals; consider the church.<sup>4</sup> That, I grant, is a good-intentioned distinction, but it's a very muddy one. For how does it happen that the pope and the episcopate are not Catholics, that they are not guilty of errors, apathies and shortcomings; and how does it happen that the church escapes the weaknesses of mortality when she is forced to find her life and realize her being in and through the lives of mortal men? Professor Maritain is much chagrined that Catholics should look upon General Franco as one of God's executive vicegerents; but it is none other than his pope and episcopate and church who have proclaimed this very thing. Thus does his distinction break down by his own judgments. He has drawn his circle too low; his church must be included in the category of earthly things. It may have the Christian gospel; but so do men have the image of God in them, yet this does not make them sinless. The church is not a perfect society or the Kingdom of God on earth, as Catholics most mistakenly claim; it is the place where the perfect is made known, where the Kingdom of God is declared, where the judgments of God are "pointed at all human actions and institutions, including the church itself."<sup>5</sup>

### III

How much do mortal men really know about God's will? Many of them claim to know a great deal. John Calvin and Cotton Mather thought they were exceptionally well informed. The Vatican pretends to know it perfectly with regard to matters of faith and morals, and faith and morals cover a large territory, even penetrating

into all territory. The followers of Frank N. D. Buchman have such access to God's will that they are enabled to choose the day's necktie in accordance with it. Many others know God's will, and know that they know it. In fact, a dramatic and decisive event almost never takes place but that the Monday *New York Times* carries a report of a sermon in which God's will is related to that event. As the worshippers of Father Divine would say, "Peace, it's wonderful!"

But this knowledge doesn't bring peace, and it isn't wonderful. It only creates fresh problems and more confusion. The knowers of God's will do not agree, and can be shown to have made grievous mistakes. Abraham Lincoln, according to the interpretation of Stephen Vincent Benét, was confronted with a confusion of such knowledge:

They talk to me about God's will  
In righteous deputations and platoons,  
Day after day, laymen and ministers.  
They write me prayers from Twenty Million Souls  
Defining me God's will and Horace Greeley's.  
God's will is General This and Senator That,  
God's will is this poor colored fellow's will.  
It is the will of the Chicago churches,  
It is this man's and his worst enemies'.  
But all of them are sure they know God's will.  
I am the only man who does not know it.<sup>6</sup>

The Catholic hierarchy was sure that God was on the side of General Franco and his fascist allies; but the majority of people in this country doubted it. After the Munich agreement, a metropolitan parson called Prime Minister Chamberlain "an ambassador of God"; but a great many good and intelligent folk thought he

<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Catholic Heresy," *Christian Century*, Dec. 8, 1937.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown's Body* (Farrar & Rinehart, 1927, 1928).

<sup>7</sup> Isa. 55:8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Vernon White, *A Working Faith for the World* (Harper & Bros., 1938).

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was one who feeds the tiger with somebody else's meat. The National Industrial Recovery Act and the NRA of Mr. Roosevelt's first administration were said by one spiritual commentator to embody the "spirit of Christ"; but it turned out that the latter embodied chiefly the spirit of General Hugh S. Johnson.

The confusion and the proved errors of those who have claimed overmuch knowledge of God's will have driven some to the conclusion that God's will is unknowable to men. It is utterly transcendent to history. Men are so ignorant and selfish that God is "wholly other" than our ideas and experiences. His will is not to be identified with anything human or temporal, nor can it be known within the prison of the human and temporal.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Nor are your ways my ways, saith the Lord;  
But as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are my ways higher than your ways,  
And my thoughts than your thoughts.<sup>7</sup>

Between God and man there exists a gulf of "infinite qualitative difference."

This viewpoint makes a strong appeal in an age when men of good will seem unable to do anything to break the grip of ill will, when all political schemes appear hopelessly corrupt and destined to replace one evil by another quite as bad, when it is obvious to a person of moral insight that God's will is transcendent to most if not all our partisan conflicts and factional struggles. It undoubtedly holds much truth, a truth one is inclined to emphasize after he has encountered several people who claim intimate knowledge of the Almighty's mind.

But I think this point of view — "Barthianism," as



we have come to call it — is not a satisfactory solution of the problem of knowing God's will, that it is simply a reaction to its opposite, and that it vitiates religion quite as much as does authoritarianism. I think the devil likes authoritarianism and Barthianism equally well. Under the first he can claim the world under the guise of God's holy regent; under the second he can claim the world because it is freely turned over to him. By separating God completely from men, Barthianism becomes anti-ethical. If even the best of human righteousness is but a filthy rag, then all one can reasonably be asked to do is to sin in great humility and self-abasement. There is important truth in this conception, I recognize; but it raises as many problems as it solves, if it solves any; and I do not see how men can be satisfied with it for any length of time. Barthianism is certainly not pharisaical, but it is cynical rather than realistic.

Authoritarianism presumes to know too much; Barthianism presumes to know too little. Mortal men, through the Christian religion, know what the will of God is in a general way. Indeed, this knowledge is the essence of Christianity. It is God's will that men shall recognize themselves and one another as children of God and as members of one universal community; it is his will that the way of love is the way wherein true life is to be found; and so forth. But we do not know the will of God in detail. For example, we know that the will of God is opposed to human slavery. We are certain of this. But we do not know that the will of God favored the American Civil War effort to abolish slavery. Again, we know for certain that the presence of eight or ten million unemployed in our land, who, through no fault of their own, are deprived of the opportunity to be men in the full sense of the word, is contrary to the will of

God. It is the will of God that we recognize this persisting condition as a blot upon our collective life, and that we make a sincere and intelligent effort to remedy it. It is God's will that we get a plan, as good a plan as lies within our capacity. But we cannot say, we do not know, that a particular plan which we might formulate will be God's will.

Dr. Hugh Vernon White suggests that God has left to man the responsibility for formulating programs and drawing up specific plans. God ordains general principles, and judges man's programs and patterns; but the making of programs is "the realm of human freedom and responsibility," "a task for the intelligence and good will of Christian men" acting as men and not as *agents* of God.<sup>8</sup>

There is another danger in man's desire and effort to know too much about the will of God which should be mentioned. That is the attempt to relate the will of God directly and immediately to every concrete situation. This is at once expecting too much of men and too little of God.

A minor illustration is the Buchmanite practice of referring the most trivial questions to God's will. Shall I wear a blue or red necktie today? Shall I go to Syracuse by train or automobile? I cannot think that God has a will in such matters. As Dr. White would say, this is the realm of human freedom and responsibility.

A major illustration is the attempt to relate God directly to situations of conflict, trying to see him as on one side or the other, as in the World War. This is an insuperable problem; it arises only through our old corrupt friend, the failure to distinguish between God and men. So many concrete situations are of man's own sinful creation that the will of God cannot be known as

residing within them in the form of an active force, but only above them in the form of judgment. The Great War was a situation produced by man's iniquity. God was not on either side during that conflict, but against both sides. It is blasphemy for men to draw a little circle and find God's will enclosed within it. (Herein lies the truth of Barthianism.)

I think we know enough about the will of God to feel under moral compulsions and to recognize moral distinctions; we can know that some things are more in accord with God's will than some other things. But we do not and cannot know enough to dictate in God's name. This ignorance makes democratic government proper and necessary. Indeed, no lesson of history is plainer than that men had better be democratic. Every regime, Christian or otherwise, that has assumed an authoritarian position has made its overthrow morally justifiable and historically inevitable through its denial of the dynamic nature of history, and through its identification of temporal and relative arrangements with the eternal and absolute. Authoritarianism was the clear mistake of the medieval church and of Puritanism. This mistake brought forth not simply a successful rebellion, but also a moral rebellion. Christians would be more than stupid if they repeated that mistake.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *New Republic*, Dec. 21, 1938, p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> *Christian Century*, April 6, 1938, p. 424.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Freedom in the Modern World* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), pp. 66-69.

<sup>4</sup> Walter M. Horton, *Contemporary Continental Theology* (Harper & Bros., 1938), p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Catholic Heresy," *Christian Century*, Dec. 8, 1937.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown's Body* (Farrar & Rinehart, 1927, 1928).

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